

A Tale of Two Profilers

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A Tale of Two Profilers

by [BurningSlowly](#).

Summary

It had been so peaceful moving about life as a ghost, a fading myth, so Will couldn't understand why after all this time he found himself walking towards the yellow police tape.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Crossing of Yellow Tape

Presumed dead that's what they had been declared after the night they had fallen off the rocky cliffs. The force of impact, the relentless crashing of the waves, the mangled leftovers of their shirts discovered days later made it easy to come up with the presumption of their demise. All of it had been by design. So had been their slip away from Jack Crawford and the FBI; plans painted in blood that assured they'd be free.

It was assured that they would fade into obscurity after receiving their just end.

Two of the most-wanted criminals gone, leaving all those obsessively following their story on *Tattletale Crimes* to sleep better. And even a bit of his own sort of justice against those that had stood in his way for so long came now that he was nothing but a ghost to them. He could no longer be touched. Could no longer be pulled by their whims, the very same that had sent him careening off a cliff.

It had been so peaceful moving about life as a ghost, a fading myth, so Will couldn't understand why after all this time he found himself walking towards the yellow police tape.

The day began as any other with the thought of murder getting Malcolm out of bed. This day's affirmation, "If there is no struggle, there is no progress".

Good ol' Fredrick Douglass Malcolm thought, tossing back his morning breakfast of organized pills. Struggle had been in every step of his day for years and he still had yet to see much progress for himself. If anything, the more he stayed in this constant internal struggle the more he felt as if he were going backward.

Let someone else struggle for a bit he thought as he dressed.

He thought to leave his phone as he headed out. Every deity known to man knew that he could use a day without receiving a call from his sister Ainsley or one of his parents. Knowing that the nervous tremor in his hand would only serve to annoy him more if he abandoned it, he pocketed the phone and headed out.

"Kind of you to finally show up," JT gruffly greeted, folding his jacket-clad arms tightly. His usual neutral face scrunched as though he'd been stewing in the thought of why he had, of all people, been put on Malcolm Watch Duty this morning. To be fair they weren't the best of friends, in fact, he didn't exactly know what the detective thought of him. Probably a nutcase who couldn't tell the time.

He still couldn't get the timing of arriving at a crime scene. Arriving early would seem that he was too eager to track down the killer, which he was, and coming too late would assure that

he missed out on certain clues that the forensic team would bag up. One day he would master it, then again maybe it was for the best that he didn't. Working within the FBI, before not so graciously being tossed out, had left him somewhat itching to defy the strict and orderly. Being the NYPD's consultant was way more freeing with a lot less red tape that he had to be bound against. In the strangest way, he was grateful that close-minded individuals of the FBI couldn't see the potential that his insistent mind could not shut out.

To an outsider or a stuck-up FBI agent, it would seem that he thought of himself as self-important. The truth was that the NYPD could do without him but he would crumble if he wasn't allowed to step foot onto a crime scene again. The various thoughts that plagued him wouldn't rest. He needed to be on the job. It was a strange co-dependency that he had fostered, but that mattered little if it helped find justice for victims. He needed to help these victims. He needed to be at every crime scene he could. He needed to prove to himself that he could do this.

"You know you would miss me if I wasn't here," he said as JT helped lift the yellow police tape for him.

Rolling his eyes, JT guided him along.

The aquarium was an amalgamation of vibrant colors. He hadn't been to an aquarium before, it was too normal of an experience. And too public for his taste, but as they walked past the large tanks he wondered what it would've been like to be normal. If he hadn't grown up in a wealthy family if his father hadn't held a horrible secret... would he have been normal? The only normal he knew was this; the anticipation of each step while his mind raced as he approached the latest scene.

Who would consider this normal? he thought as he crossed the second yellow tape sectioning off the tunnel-like tank.

Above he could see the shadow of a shark shifting through the water, but what caught his eye was the body wavering along the bottom of the tank among the coral. The way the body swayed like an overgrown seaweed was almost a calming sight. Nearly peaceful compared to the other homicides he'd observed. She hardly looked real at all with the bluish tint of the water; a serene statue. In the reflection of the tank he noticed Dani join in behind them.

"So death by drowning?" JT asked their leading forensic scientist Edrisa, who was jotting something onto her clipboard.

"You would think so wouldn't you," Edrisa said a little too jovial. She motioned for them to step closer to the tank. "Look," with a careful gloved finger she traced the edge of the victim's head. When the body moved just right he could see the break in the skull.

"I would bet on blunt force trauma for the actual cause of death. A typical method, but" She bent down to point out the victim's feet.

"Whoever did this wanted to make sure that this person was seen," he said, noticing that weights had been wrapped around her ankles.

Edrisa smiled before schooling her face. "I will know more once we fish her out. Sorry," she said, catching Dani's and JT's unimpressed looks. Neither of them were fond of Edrisa's comedic nature but he enjoyed her attempts to keep everything lighthearted. It was nice not being the only eccentric one on the team.

Ensuring that the investigation didn't get completely off track Dani stepped forward. By the scuffing on her boots and hair tied back, he knew that it hadn't been a slow workday for her. How long had she been here? Dani was the hardest working person he knew. It wouldn't be a surprise if she had been here since the call came in.

"Everything else was still intact, there wasn't any break in" Dani informed him. "We've already pulled up a list of workers with access to the tanks. Nothing suspicious yet."

"Yet." JT muttered at the same time he asked "Who discovered the body?"

Dani pointed to a skinny teen custodian decked out in sea life pins. Based on the way she kept motioning back to the tank he could tell that she was shaken up by the whole ordeal. Sometimes he forgot that seeing this sort of thing was terrifying. Normal people didn't seek it out as he did. Normal people avoided confronting any reminders of death.

"It would take a long time to kill and present the body in this fashion." He watched as divers were sent into the tank to retrieve the victim. Their movement caused the victim to sway less peacefully than before. "Where is the access point-" His question tapered off as he noticed an unfamiliar face standing at the end of the tunnel. This whole area had been sanctioned off and yet none of the people coming or going seemed to remove the man from the active crime scene.

Nothing about the man's dress pointed to him being the owner or a worker of the Aquarium. He wore a light jacket that stopped below his waist, dark blue jeans, and a plain grey button-up. Somehow the average look made him simultaneously stand out and blend in.

Malcolm wracked his brain but still couldn't recall seeing him before. He definitely would've remembered this man. He... He wasn't sure what kept drawing his eyes to him. Trying to listen to Dani's breakdown he couldn't help watching the man standing as still as a statue and then suddenly turn away as if he had grown tired of watching the fish.

"...Bright?"

"Who was that?"

"Who?" Dani asked, looking down the now empty tunnel.

"If you say anything about a ghost I am leaving," JT said, glancing at the tunnel.

"Ghosts aren't real, well except the ones in our head."

JT frowned. Perhaps it was too early to talk about such things.

"I meant the man in the grey button u, brunette,"

The two blinked at him as though he really were describing a ghost.

“Oh, you must mean *him*,” Edrisa chuckled. “He completely snuck up on me earlier, I thought he was you and then I was like,” She motioned widely in a comical shocked expression. She was far too animated to be someone who worked with the dead but it did suit her.

“So who is he?” he asked, feeling both his patience running out and his tremor itching to make itself known.

“I didn’t catch a name, but he’s with the FBI.”

“Why would they be interested in this?” JT asked, puffing up his chest as if the action could hide the scene from any unwanted attention.

“Well if they want this case we better beat them to the finish line,” Dani said.

The second Will stepped through the door of their apartment he heard the question he’d known would be asked; “Where did you run off to?”

There were still times he could almost laugh at coming home to Hannibal; the man that had set so much in motion back in Baltimore now waiting to greet him in their shared home in New York and not his grandiose Psychiatry office.

Their apartment was hardly generous with its space or hot water and yet Hannibal found ways to give it an “air of sophistication”. Regardless of the updated decor, Hannibal would never stop looking out of place dressed up in the remaining three-piece suit he was able to pick up along the way. It was funny what habits a person couldn’t change.

“You know I can’t run from you anymore,” he said, shuffling off his jacket only barely managing to remember not to toss it onto the couch but to put it on the coat rack instead.

Who else would put a coat rack in a small apartment?

“Not because you lack the ability,” Hannibal said, his eyes gliding from his ankles up as if highlighting the fact that he was hardly shackled to the floor. There still held hunger within those eyes. Will knew that if presented the opportunity Hannibal would make a fine meal of his flesh just as he had done with Bedelia.

It was positively twisted reasoning that kept him here with Hannibal. Once friends turned enemies, then fugitives on the run. What they were now he couldn’t quite define but what he could was the hunger he felt, the yearning to have Hannibal beside him and still crave his company after all this time. If he had any fears of losing his mind in this place he might have tried to flee. Jack Crawford would not chase him, no one from his old life had come looking for him in years. And perhaps that was why he clung to Hannibal; the remains of a different

life, one that had been meticulously chipped away until it was a world just for them. That thought didn't scare him anymore. Perhaps it should've. Perhaps it never did.

"I just went out."

"You don't often go out for a stroll," Hannibal commented, moving closer, his feet hardly making a sound.

"My mind was running," he explained, ruffling his windswept hair.

"And so you went to a crime scene," Hannibal indicated to the fine strand of yellow tape stuck on his shoe with the tilt of his head.

"Some habits are hard to break," he shrugged as he ripped it from his shoe and tossed it in the trash.

"Anything of interest?" Hannibal asked casually, picking up a knife from the counter as he set to chop the vegetables for tonight's dinner.

When such acts had become commonplace still eluded him. But he would be a liar if he said that he didn't enjoy coming home to the smell of cooking and the sight of Hannibal in their kitchen.

"The crime itself was nothing."

"But?"

"But I was distracted by this man, their profiler, he looked like a young Brendan Fraser."

As if not too eager to hear the answer Hannibal asked "Who?"

"Don't tell me you've never seen The Mummy movies, they're classics."

"What you consider classic is astonishing" Hannibal smirked his fingers carefully pushing off the stubborn slice of cucumber from the tip of the knife.

"You are uncultured," he said, unable to stop himself from starting a childish debate. Deep down he knew that doing so was something they both looked forward to.

Two strides were all it took for Hannibal to be mere inches from him.

"When I was out you didn't do some *grocery shopping* did you?" he asked, unphased by the cold knife tapping against his side.

"I have been law-abiding for these past few years for you haven't I, Will?" Hannibal whispered as he moved the flattened blade over his chest. Sometimes he wondered if Hannibal suspected he wore a wire and that these years on the run had been a long con to get him locked up once again.

Locking him up had stopped being his goal the moment he felt the cliff's edge had disappeared beneath them. As the blistering cold water threatened to fill his lungs before being hauled to the surface he had made his choice. Sometimes when he reflected on the past he wondered if he truly ever wanted to capture the man. Maybe it had been being part of the FBI that had drummed in the thought that Hannibal needed to be locked up.

Hannibal's smirk widened. "I should punish you for being rude."

"Eat me," he challenged. A complete idiotic thing to say to a cannibal.

The pad of his thumb traced over Hannibal's lower lip before he descended on it. Strong teeth latched on sucking before he could feel the pressure increasing to break the skin beneath. Will didn't care about that or how the knife was still at play somewhere out of his sight. With a calm step back Hannibal released him. How he could appear so put together frustrated him to no end.

"We shouldn't spoil our dinner," Hannibal said, returning to the kitchen.

"...Malcolm!"

"What?" he asked, suddenly finding himself sitting across from his mother in the dining room of his childhood home.

"Now what's got you so occupied?" she asked dramatically; although nine out of ten times she knew just what he was thinking about.

This time was a little different. Usually, it was the case that fascinated him or the ever-looming figure of his father trying to worm his way into 'helping' him solve a case. But what was swimming in his mind was the stranger at the aquarium. He hardly paid attention to people coming and going around sites so this man had to be of some importance, right? He appeared so normal and yet this pull of curiosity couldn't come from nothing.

Had the man been a part of the incident? Did he know something? Was he really with the FBI?

"Malcolm" his mother swatted him lightly on his hand. "Really," she huffed.

"Sorry" he rubbed his forehead as if the action could push down his thoughts.

"You know,"

Here it comes he thought knowing full well the face she was making even without opening his eyes. He could be a whole continent away and still know the way her lip curled in a disappointed sneer and her eyes scanned his face in an equally unpleasant action. Concern was all that he saw in her eyes. He wished he could do more to stop her from worrying so much.

“If it’s too much I can always pull a few strings, get you a nice job one less....well you know.”

Opening his eyes he focused on the empty wine glass in front of him wishing that it was full. “We’ve been over this mother.” They had been over it nearly every single day since he joined the FBI and twice as much since he was kicked out. He needed the stress of the job to function. Besides, the jobs that his mother could get him were not interesting in the least. She’d be over the moon if he just stopped working altogether to become a socialite like she was.

Tried and failed that he thought repressing the not so fond memories of private schooling and being dragged to events to be paraded around like a show pony. More times than not people looked at him as though he were a ticking time bomb of insanity and deep down he admitted that he did feel like one. How could he not when off-handed comments like “you remind me of your father” stung. Just how much could he be like his father and not know it? For all he knew there was a bet going on counting just how long he could go before snapping. That was how the outsiders saw it, but his father didn’t just snap one day. His father was a serial killer, and like many before him, he was born with that tendency that was cultivated over the years. The wiser bet would be on whether he had inherited this father’s tendencies.

“I know, but you could be so great,” she smiled, hope pouring from her.

He hated to turn her down over and over. On the other hand, however, he couldn’t do what she asked. Having her ‘unstable’ son around would not help her maintain the remaining status that hadn’t been stripped away from allegations and the insidious rumor mill. In a blink of an eye, so many had turned against her after the infamous serial killer The Surgeon was discovered to be her husband. She had no choice but to painstakingly pick up the pieces of her shattered life ever since then. He admired her strength even when it came out as overbearing at times.

“Fine.” She rolled her eyes. “Tell me what is more important than the upcoming Gala. You know that I need you to be on your best behavior.”

“Might as well keep me at home” he muttered, earning another light slap on the back of his hand.

He couldn’t help it no matter how many times she tried to re-introduce him into polite society his reputation would sever any connections he made instantly. He was more than grateful that he had people at the NYPD that more or less accepted him. Or a version of himself. Dani, JT, and Edrisa still didn’t know who his father was. They didn’t need to know. They could never know. If they did he would be chased away just like he had been from the FBI. Only Gil, the head detective, knew about his connections to The Surgeon since he had been working the case all those years ago. At times he resented Gil for knowing who he was; knowing how internally broken he was.

“Malcolm,”

“It’s really nothing, I was just wondering about someone I saw on our latest case.”

Her face pinched as though she bit into a lemon but encouraged him to continue with a tight nod.

“It’s really nothing. I mean it could’ve been a coincidence otherwise it makes no sense that he would be there.”

“Are you referring to the ...you know,” she asked visibly fighting against drumming her nails over the table.

“No. The victim was female.” Even if he could, he wouldn't say anything else about the case. His mother hardly needed any more fuel for her nightmares. “There was someone from the FBI there but it hardly makes sense. I mean this is a run-of-the-mill case.” Acting on their own, his feet began to pace.

“This is really bothering you,” Mother said, sounding way more shocked than he expected. “I can pull a few strings and-”

“-NO. No thank you.” He quickly corrected. “Like I said it could've been a coincidence. It’s not like it was anyone I knew.”

If it had been he would have caved in to his mother’s offer. He shuttered thinking of being reunited with some of his old FBI colleagues. The things they would say.... They would eat him alive leaving him a disgraced sack of bones.

“I can handle this guy, whoever he is.”

“Are you sure?”

“When have you ever known me not to rise to a challenge?” He smiled.

Old Habits are the Hardest to Break

Suspects had been laid out and the interrogations were underway. Everything was going as it always did still, Malcolm couldn't help wanting to look over his shoulder. He half expected someone to barge in on their meeting and kick them off the case. And when that didn't happen he expected the case to wrap up nicely.

This is what I get for assuming things he thought tacking on another photo onto the board of the empty meeting room. None of this was exactly helpful. "Why does this feel like the tip of some iceberg?" he muttered to himself.

"What did you say Bright?" Gil asked, poking his head through the door.

"Nothing," he said mostly to the board. "This just doesn't sit right."

That was an understatement. The killer knew their way around the aquarium enough to not be caught on camera, which was no easy task. According to the blueprints, there were eight cameras alone in the area where the victim was found. This killer was volatile when it came to the act of killing but conscious planning had gone into each step. A jealous ex-boyfriend might have looked to be the part at first but it didn't hold up to his new profile. The victim, Dorean's ex had petty theft priors and no means to get into the aquarium after hours. Nor did he seem capable of such a detailed plan if, Dorean's friend, Kate's description of her ex "being as dumb as a rock" held any proof.

Petty thieves didn't make the jump to murder without reason. Could they even trust Dorean's friend? Right now there wasn't much of a choice. The ex had yet to be located. He needed something more to break through this case. There had to be something overlooked.

"Well, we can't do much until all the labs come in," Gil said, breaking his train of thought.

"Maybe I should talk with Edrisa." She was always willing to pull off the record research but she hadn't bombarded him with murder trivia like normal. She had to be busy. Everyone else was out there working while he remained here staring at the unhelpful board.

"You should eat something," Gil said, readying to head off.

"Wait,"

Walking back Gil stared at him, his dark eyes pleading to be let go. Malcolm knew that he had been running around all week chasing dead ends. Gil was probably sleeping as restless as he was lately.

"You haven't heard anything about the man who was there that day have you?" he asked despite the pang of guilt for taking up the man's little free time. "You know, FBI."

"Nothing and I don't plan to give a call to those guys. Do. Not. Bother. With. Them." He emphasized with a strict wag of his finger reminiscent of the way someone would scold a

dog.

“Message received.”

“Good,” Gil glanced at the board. The whole team had to be sick of staring at so much nothing, but he couldn’t let it go. “Now take a breather. I’ll let you know when we get something.”

“Of course.”

Gil’s face hardened. “I mean it Bright.”

“Okay. Look, I’m getting my stuff and going” he said, picking up his phone.

Squirreling away a few papers in his messenger bag while Gil wasn’t looking, he hurried away to continue his work somewhere else.

Hannibal had lost track of how often Will had paused to stare out the window. He hadn’t seen him this alert since the first day he had awoken to their new home. Hannibal couldn’t help smirk at the memory of Will all riled up about being in New York instead of somewhere safer like a remote area of a foreign country. Hiding in plain sight was his specialty and it wasn’t as if Will hadn’t tracked him down overseas back when they were on opposing sides.

New York was big and bustling and if necessary it was easy to let a few wayward individuals go missing. Not that he’d put his skills to the test. “Meat” had yet to be put back on the menu out of courtesy for Will. Besides he’d yet to find a sufficient source of “meat” that hadn’t been soured by the city. Of course, that didn’t mean he had stopped looking or prevented his mind from concocting plans when left to his own devices. There would be a time he could hunt once more and he wouldn’t be satisfied if he couldn’t properly feed Will and himself.

Will swayed from foot to foot as though he were a human metronome. He didn’t much care for this spike in anxiety. He often forgot what a ball of nerves Will could be. A ball he enjoyed unraveling slowly before setting back into place.

Slowly he reached out his hand but within a second Will managed to grab his wrist. It took all but a moment for Will to realize what he did and let go.

“I told you not to sneak up on me like that” Will said, feet wanting to sway once more.

“Dear Will,” he whispered, reveling in the slight shiver coursing up Will’s spine. “Do you wish to talk about it?” Lightly he pressed his hand against Will’s lower back.

“I already told you. What I did was a mistake.”

He dragged his fingers upward following the curvature of Will’s spine counting all the notches. Will was now following his movements the best he could. He pressed right between

Will's shoulder blades, a constant source of his tension. Some properly placed pressure and he could undo Will.

"No doubt you will do it again in the future." His fingers crawled up Will's neck.

"That doesn't help" Will huffed, turning his attention back to the window.

"Neither does standing watch for something that may or may not come." Slipping past him he tugged the curtains closed.

Standing so close he could smell the nervous perspiration along Will's face. They were due for some excitement in the routine isolation that had been the last few years on the run.

"What are you thinking?" Will accused, eyes searching his own for the answer. He didn't need to, he would gladly show Will anything he asked.

"That you should go back and solve this case instead of waiting for men in a black van to appear."

"And what will you do if I accept your *permission* to do so?" Will snarked.

Raising his hand he pushed back one of those wild curls behind Will's ear. "Still concerned about me after all this time?"

"You should be flattered." There was a challenge mixed with another emotion in those words.

There had been worlds filled with doubt between them before.

Before, not now he thought, stepping even closer. The deep ache he felt for Will always screamed when he disappeared from his sight. He knew that Will felt similarly otherwise they wouldn't constantly find themselves returning to one another this way.

"I am" he whispered against those plump lips.

Will hated it when Hannibal was right, which was more times than he cared to admit.

Clacking loudly against the public library's ancient computer keyboard he pulled up anything involving the case he had walked in on. So far there was hardly anything out of the norm. All there was a vague mention of the murder on the online newspapers he'd been skimming all morning. Still, it felt good to be investigating again.

He'd grown anxious in the downtime he had these past years. Some days it felt as though he were pacing in a cage he'd put himself and Hannibal in. They had to be careful. The smallest of slips would ruin everything and yet he had to be a glutton for punishment to worm his way onto a crime scene after all this time.

New York was ripe with crimes much less creative than he'd dealt with before. Perhaps it had been Hannibal's plan to fill in that need. But so far there had been no mention of "meat" returning to their menu. He couldn't believe Hannibal had held to that promise.

Will shook his head in some half attempt to get his head to focus.

He needed to be out there either to solve or commit a crime. For now, he wanted the former.

"Found anything of use?" Hannibal teased while jotting down a recipe from what looked like a Russian cookbook from the seventies. He tried not to make a face when recalling the time Hannibal made Kholodets, a jellied meat dish. Not even Hannibal could make him stomach that a second time.

"This isn't exactly the best tool for investigation," he said, tapping against the clunky monitor in hopes that the action would help the ancient technology load the screen faster.

He was going about this all wrong, he didn't need Hannibal or anyone else to tell him that. But his choices were slim. Being spotted at the scene for a second time so soon would put him on the investigating team's radar. No matter what he couldn't be caught. They couldn't be caught.

"I should just give up on this." Through the reflection of the monitor he caught Hannibal's disappointed face. Neither of them were the type to give up, but that was precisely what led them to this situation. Turning around he abandoned his half-loaded computer screen. "I should take this as a sign to forget about this case. I'm sure that other guy will eventually catch the culprit."

It pained him to say those words. Even when he was forced into a teaching position at the academy he'd felt the itch to return to the field even if just to move the lengthy investigations into quick sentences. To help people, to bring justice to those wrongs had been his reasons for joining the FBI. And for the most part he'd been welcomed with open arms because of his supposed gift. His ability to connect with the killers had pushed him onto a pedestal, a shining example of how Behavioral Psychology could solve cases, and then thoroughly pushed off the edge.

How quickly I've come to hate the one job I thought was perfect for me.

With a sigh, Hannibal pocketed his notebook and laid the cookbook on the return cart. The reaction made him feel a bit disappointed as well. Hannibal wasn't the type of person to start tedious arguments in a public library. A part of him wanted Hannibal to push him towards work. But he knew that was the part of himself that craved Jack Crawford's approval. If he were still with Jack he'd have been plopped in the middle of a scene for hours until he could properly see how each step had been carried out. Jack had always been a man of results.

"I should take up another hobby" he suggested as they stepped out of the library into the chilling air. "Or maybe we could get a dog."

New York was no place for a dog. In fact, many of the city's aspects made it hardly a place for humans. Within the proverbial rat race there were glimpses of pleasure to the overcrowded mass. And although he didn't view himself as a sentimental man he often thought fondly back to Baltimore. Far quieter than New York but the bustling city did hold the advantage of a few choice disappearances not raising alarms as long as he resisted the urge to craft art out of his victims. The intricate manipulation of his material, sculpting beauty beneath unyielding bones and muscle would only remain in his head. At least until meat returned to the menu.

“Still trying to make me give in on that request?” Hannibal teased as he reached over to secure Will’s scarf before it completely flew away.

“If I am just the right amount of annoying you just might cave in.”

A smirk spread across Hannibal’s face. “I think you’re better off with attempting a new hobby.”

“What would I do? I can’t exactly fly fish and you have your cooking.”

“I am always willing to teach you.”

It was a true offer. The things that he could teach Will if he allowed it were vast.

A blood-curdling scream sounded over the noise of stalled cars as they crossed the street. Normally he ignored it, hardly anything good came out of running headfirst into danger when you were trying to lay low. But today his feet were taking him straight to the source of the sound, behind him he could hear Hannibal following.

What the hell am I thinking?

It had been some time since he had to run after Will like this. At times Will could be as quick as a frightened gazelle. How many times they had both physically and metaphorically run after each other was not lost to him now as they barreled through anyone in their way. When the thrill of a hunt called them, how could they deny it? Humans were creatures of habit for a reason.

The screams seemed to come from a hole-in-the-wall cupcake shop. From outside he could smell the batter and various icing, but what enticed him was a smell more lively. Peering through the window once Will ducked down and motioned for him to do the same.

“Damn.” Will reached for a gun that was not there. “This could get ugly.”

He didn’t mind that but would’ve preferred if he had the means to protect Will, preferably something sharp. *That could be arranged*, he thought as Will slowly opened the door.

Training had yet to fail his dear Will. It was a mixture of beauty and unrelenting anticipation watching the man creep into the store as the screams bounced along the open space. Their eyes met only long enough for Will to communicate that he should go around the back.

He had been gifted with a sort of invisibility from young. The prey he picked out never saw him coming and before him now was nothing more than that. Fresh prey.

Muffled shouts for help pulled him closer, setting off fond memories of a time best left aside for now. A knife found its way into his hand as he took another step closer.

Imbecile he thought, hidden just a few steps away from his prey. These were the moments he lived for; the precious moments where realization set in and froze his prey.

His prey's target noticed him first as he stepped out. Their eyes grew wide as the screaming seized in their throat. In that very moment his prey, who wore a full-face covered mask, turned. It was mere inches that the masked figure managed to dodge his blade. Either this person had luck on their side or had some experience with fighting.

If that's the case he thought with a smirk. Rolling up his sleeves he steadied his blade watching every inch of the figure for a sign of weakness. The masked figure lunged forward earning a swift slice of air.

"You're not as skilled as I hoped," he taunted.

Not good. This is definitely not good Will thought as he rushed over to the body trembling on the floor.

"Who?" the teen asked. Their once immaculate makeup face was swollen, bloodied, and blackened with fallen mascara. Thankfully what injuries he could see were not life-threatening.

"We're here to help." Lifting the teen he draped their arm over his shoulder.

"But,"

"Don't worry. Everything will be alright." As he dragged the teen out he wondered if he was trying to convince himself of that too.

Being in a situation like this with only Hannibal as backup was something he still wasn't quite used to. But he trusted that Hannibal would do what was needed. Hell, he'd seen him in action more than once. A part of him wanted to stay and see what Hannibal would do. They were supposed to be lying low. A large part wanted to join the fight. That inner voice spoke to the want to tear into this masked figure with reckless abandon.

Stop. Focus he told himself as he applied so much pressure to the teen's wound that they passed out from the pain. Once he made sure they cleaned evidence of him and Hannibal

then he'd call for an ambulance. "Hold on until then."

The sound of footsteps behind him brought back memories of being covered in red. When he turned around he expected to see Hannibal like that once more; soaked in his bloody victory, but when his eyes landed on him he looked spotless. Only the downward tug of his lips and the slight wrinkle on his pressed button-up were the only things out of place. The shop was deadly silent as he stood there, knife slipping into his coat pocket as though it were a keepsake.

"What no trophy?"

"He managed to escape."

He blinked trying to wrap his mind around his words. Hannibal was vicious as thorough in a fight. His prey didn't escape. "How?"

Cold eyes turned to him. "I recalled someone not wanting us to be discovered."

"I didn't realize that you were missing being locked up" he snarked.

"I prefer being locked up with you."

Even in moments like this he felt his heart flutter at those sort of comments from Hannibal. "Go home. I'll give you some time before I call this in."

"Ever the hero, but rest assured someone has done so already."

As if on cue, the sounds of sirens were moving increasingly closer.

"Shall we?" Hannibal asked, offering a hand to him.

"But-

"Everything has been taken care of. You know how good I am at covering our tracks."

Internally Hannibal was furious with these recent events. Showing restraint had cost him his prey but he would not risk Will, never again. Fleeing with Will in hand hardly felt fulfilling knowing that this petty criminal was still at large. He would find them perhaps not today or tomorrow but when he did he would make sure that the score was settled slowly and deliberately feast on the meat bit by bit.

The second they went home Will rushed to the Television, frantically flipping through the channels to get to the news. It had to be a slow news day; a blond woman was announcing the attack at the shop. It was hardly thrilling hearing the teen recount the moment, but he knew better than to attempt to pull Will away from the screen. Instead, he listened noting that if the teen revealed any telling descriptions of them he would have to go back and murder them himself.

Will pointed to the screen. "There he is."

In the background stood a man with swooped brown hair in a well paired suit. The blond woman had no problem approaching him for a comment which he pushed aside just as comfortably. These two knew each other for a long time and seemed to be on more friendly terms than Will had been with that awful reporter Freddie Lounds.

"If he's there..." Will mumbled.

"Then perhaps seeing this Breandan Fraser look-alike is a sign you should not give up on this case."

As if Will could give up. Old habits were hard to break.

Coincidence

Malcolm didn't like whatever was going on this week. Everything felt a bit off in the same way an ill-placed shirt tag did. He couldn't fully pinpoint why he felt like this though he did know the contributing factors: the upcoming Gala that his mother was insistent upon, the mysterious man at the aquarium, and now this random attack that his sister was fussing over.

"Come on, give me the scoop" Ainsley begged; nearly knocking her omelet off the table.

"There is none," he sighed for what felt like the millionth time. This was precisely why he avoided mandatory family meals.

Getting up she hurried towards his seat. "Please won't you help your sister?" She pouted.

"You know you'd get the information from someone." She was always so good at weaseling out secrets. At times it was quite admirable, other times it was just a nuisance.

"It makes it easier and concrete if I get it from a first-person source," she said waving her notebook. The secrets that book held were definitely terrifying. He was sure that somewhere in her apartment there was a bookshelf stuffed with similar books filled with his darkest secrets. And just because they were siblings didn't mean she wouldn't announce them to the world if it benefited her career. Frankly, he was surprised that she had yet to write a tell-all book entitled *My messed up Family*.

Nearly avoiding her wavering notebook he slipped past. "I have to go."

"Come on," Ainsley whined. "You can't tell me that there isn't something fishy going on here."

"It wouldn't be an investigation otherwise," he said with a shrug.

Will took one last look at himself in the mirror. He needed to look the part without looking so much like himself that he'd be recognized from old wanted posters. He rubbed his hand against his stubbled chin wondering if he should've put some more effort in growing a beard or completely shaved.

"Too late for that" Hannibal teased, seemingly knowing his every thought. Two could play at that game.

"And it's too late for you to go after yesterday's prey."

Hannibal glared without much malice. "Perhaps you are in need of my assistance."

"I won't risk it," he said right away.

"You will regret it if you get caught."

With a scoff, he turned to face Hannibal. Meeting eye to eye he was astonished to think of how far they had come together. "I think," he lightly traced along Hannibal's arm. "That the ones who would regret it the most would be the unfortunate ones who try to get in your way." Fluidly he slipped the knife from Hannibal's hand into his own. Rarely Hannibal's hands were knife-free. He had yet to determine if that was an unconscious habit or a calculated measure.

"You too are capable of all that I am."

He looked at the knife Hannibal had taken from their little adventure the other day. Within its warped mirrored image and Hannibal's residual body heat he felt reassured.

"Yes, I am."

Time was not being kind, everything that should have been done in a matter of minutes was taking hours. To top it all off the petty crimes were taking everyone's attention away from these two cases. There should've been more leads or at least Edrisa in the labs should've found some sort of clue by now.

Am I just trying to draw connections that aren't there? he thought as he looked at the spread of available information on both cases. It was a possibility. New York was a large place; a murder and an attempted robbery in a week was hardly a rare event, but there was something in his gut that told him it was connected. Even Ainsley thought there was more to yesterday's break-in. And as pestering as she was, his little sister had a good sense of crime. Convincing Gil that murder and a break-in were connected would not be easy without undeniable proof.

How could they be connected? The attack wasn't near the aquarium at all. And there was no connection between the victims, no shared friends or schooling. There had to be something.

In very much need of an eye break, he stepped out of the station. Shielding from the blinding sun he blinked the outside world into view. And then as if there was a spotlight guiding his way he saw the man from the aquarium across the street. Without much thought he found himself racing across the road.

"Get out of the way!" someone shouted as he narrowly clipped the front of a car but he didn't care. This couldn't be a coincidence.

Barling forward he screeched to a stop inches from the man. "Stop," he huffed.

"I wasn't going anywhere" the smooth voice came from above his undignified hunched over position as he took in much needed air. Straightening himself up he tried to not come across as a complete creep.

Come on Malcolm, you can do better than this. "We haven't properly met," he held out a hand. "Malcolm Bright."

Having those piercing blue-green eyes so up close made him feel.... He couldn't quite put a name to it. All he knew was that it somehow felt different from the way others looked at him. It wasn't a look of disgust or shame like the ones he got from those who knew his father. And it definitely wasn't one of judgment.

He suddenly felt the need to wipe his hand against his pant leg but refrained from doing so.

"It's nice to meet you," the man said, shaking his hand.

His heart skipped from the sudden contact. "What brings you by?"

The man raised a brow at him. "I was simply taking a walk. I didn't expect to see you again."

"You know what they say about coincidences."

The man let out a small chuckle. "I do."

There again was that strange jump in his chest. What was it about this man that made him feel like this? He'd met so many people ranging from the filthy rich to the average of average men and yet no one seemed to have caught his attention as much as this man.

"Since we've run into each other, I have been curious about that case at the aquarium."

"Is it something that the FBI is looking into?" he asked, feeling the need to stick up for his team if it came down to it.

"Not at this moment." The man's lip quirked in a half-smile. "Curiosity has always been a weakness of mine."

"I can relate, but I don't think my team would appreciate me giving any information on our progress." *Or lack of* he thought.

"Completely understandable. I'll see you around Mr. Bright."

Before he could even think to ask for the man's name he had disappeared.

"I see you have made it back in one piece" Hannibal commented as Will slammed the door behind him.

Slinking to the floor, Will wrapped his arms around his head. Laying his whisk to the side he approached Will. It couldn't have been that horrible but he knew Will to absorb far too much stress. He'd worked hard to understand Will's conflicting beliefs. On a surface level he could make sense of the fractured morals; years of being a psychiatrist had helped him to dig into individuals' heads and pull out what was needed. Many of his patients had struggled with their views of what was right and wrong. He didn't believe in such black and white notions. What was right for one could be deemed wrong for another. He knew Will had realized that

much, but the man had years under Jack Crawford's thumb. Years of drilling in the belief that his usefulness only extended as far as he could solve cases. He'd worked hard to tear down such thoughts.

At times Will still served as an enigma.

"How do you do it?" Will muttered.

"Do what?" he whispered.

"Holding everything back while pretending to be someone else." Will messed with his beautiful curls. Will would always be a work of art in his eyes; the way his hair framed his defiant eyes, the feel of his sparse stubble beneath his fingertips... "Right now I don't think he knows who I am... Talking to him..." Will sighed. "Being thought of as still being a part of the FBI I just...It felt a bit much and I don't understand why. I know that I can't ignore this case but how do I continue the charade and for how long? How long until a screw up cost us everything we fought for?"

This self-doubt was not a new occurrence. There had been moments over the years where Will's insecurities would rear their ugly heads. He didn't understand why Will couldn't move on. Life here was different from their life before. They could move about the shadows of the city. This world could be theirs if Will just gave in.

Reaching into Will's jacket he located the knife. "Control your breathing" he whispered, placing the knife into Will's hand. "Will,"

"I hated looking at him so close up. It was like looking in a funhouse mirror. I saw who I was...or at least the person that I had pretended to be... The person that Jack Crawford saw me to be."

"That man only saw you as an ace in the hole."

"I know." Will once again buried his face into his hands.

"And do you think that this man is in a similar situation as you were?"

Will let out a deep exhale. "You're gonna say that I'm projecting."

"That's quite possible." He said calmly but internally boiled at the thought of someone else holding control of Will. It had become a painstakingly slow process to show reassurance to Will. He understood only so much; he couldn't empathize the way Will did but he could recognize the turmoil. Irritation ran up his spine as he lifted Will's head from beneath his hands. Who was this profiler to set self-doubt into his dear Will?

"Perhaps we should invite him to dinner."

"Dinner?" Will chuckled. "You have not wanted to invite anyone for dinner in a while."

“You’ve never allowed me to host a proper dinner party.”

Shaking his head he leaned into Hannibal’s arms. He knew talks of dinner were his to-go-to conversation in order to cheer him up. He’d lost count of all the times Hannibal had laid out elaborate plans pairing anyone who he deemed as rude with a perfectly matched recipe.

After the incident at the cupcake shop yesterday he had to admit that he craved to be out there following Hannibal into trouble instead of continuing to hide. Hiding wasn’t a luxury, it was a necessity. Making contact with Malcolm Bright was not what he should be doing.

“Tell me more about this profiler,” Hannibal said as his fingers glided through his messy curls. The action reminded him of countless touches like this, ones that seemed to facilitate spooling out every thought in his head.

The image of the man came clearly to him; his slicked-back hair falling as he gained control of his breath. His wide eyes took in him as though committing his face to memory.

“His name is Malcolm Bright. Clearly there is something a bit off about him... A childhood trauma perhaps, since he has a noticeable tremor in his left hand that he represses. Affluent upbringing. Could not have been in this field for very long or at least not with the NYPD. There’s this unsureness about him like he doesn’t exactly fit in.”

“I can see where your similarities lie.”

Those words didn’t help ease him. As though noting this Hannibal pressed his face into the crook of his neck sending warm puffs of air against his skin. Actions like this made him realize just how simple he was underneath the swirling thoughts and anxieties.

Damn if I’m not human he thought leaning into the touch.

“I could work with those ingredients” Hannibal whispered, causing all the hair on the back of his neck to stand in attention. “Invite him to dinner.” Lips pressed hard against his collar bone.

“What,” he paused to gather his thoughts. “What dish would you serve if I did?”

“There’s much I could do with lean meat.”

Shutting his eyes he felt Hannibal pull him closer. A finger moved from the meeting of his collar bone down his sternum.

“First I would need to prepare the right slice of meat; tender and lacking too much fat. It would be drenched in a spice rub and seared on a garlic buttered pan.”

“Medium rare?” he asked, setting his mind to focus on the imagery of the meal.

“If that is what you’d desire.” Hannibal’s breath tickled his skin.

“Wonton shells brushed with olive oil would be prepared in tandem. Once cooked it would be stuffed with a mixture of lettuce topped with thin slices of meat drizzled with a sauce of your

choice.” He ended his description with a not too gentle nip at Will’s Adam’s apple.

“That” he gulped. “Does sound delicious.”

“Should I draft a formal invitation?”

“No. At least not yet.”

Malcolm couldn’t get the man out of his head. Throughout the night that was usually bombarded with nightmares of his childhood, he saw him. Groggily he loosened the strap against his arm, his own security for not falling and hurting himself in the middle of his night terrors. This all felt so strange. What was it about this guy that made him run around his subconscious like this?

Rubbing his face he stared at his reflection in the mirror.

“Somehow I look more sleep-deprived than usual,” he muttered.

Entering the kitchen he noticed that his mother had helpfully left him a typed-out schedule for this weekend. Why she had even bothered to create a schedule they both knew he wasn’t going to follow was beyond him. He definitely wasn’t going to a suit fitting or sailing with the children of his mother’s acquaintances. It was bad enough that he was being forced to attend the upcoming Gala.

All he wanted to do was focus on this case. Abandoning the list and breakfast he pulled out the files he had managed to “borrow” the other day.

There’s something in this, I know it.

Slowly he read every word, scrutinized every available image and yet he was drawing a blank. All evidence seemed to fall into a profile of a crime of passion. He didn’t have a list of suspects with him but he did remember Gil mentioning an ex that looked like a possible lead. More times than not the culprit was the ex or a family member, but their profile seemed off. It was a little too by the book for his liking. And since when did he get the easy cases? Plus the attack at the cupcake shop hardly fit in at all. Maybe he should’ve stopped looking for a connection.

“And then there’s him.” He nearly slapped his forehead for thinking of that man again. He needed to stay away from anyone in the FBI. They hated him and would make his life hell if he stuck his nose in any of their business. He just had to forget about that man. He had to...

Bzz. bzzz his phone shook against the glass coffee table. Its bright light impossible to ignore. He caught the number for Claremont Psychiatric Hospital. Sometimes he wondered if his deranged father had bugged his place so that whenever he was in a mental block he could swoop in for the rescue. No, rescue wasn’t the correct word at all. Not once did he feel rescued by that man. Seeing him always messed with his head.

“Isn’t this enjoyable?” Hannibal remarked as they boarded the subway. Although his face was perfectly composed, Will knew that internally he was raging against the grime of the station, the boisterous woman talking on the phone, and the man chewing gum with an open mouth before placing the wad onto the underside of the seat. If there was ever a place to meet a wide selection of rude people it would be the subways.

“Should I have left you at home?” he asked hoping that the baby a few seats down wouldn’t burst into tears. One more thing would surely set Hannibal off.

“Would you have been able to stomach leaving me?” Hannibal countered. Eyes like daggers pointed at the man plopping another piece of gum into his mouth.

“Just ignore everyone else,” he whispered as they moved along the cramped subway car. “And can you not stand so close?”

“Difficult to avoid” Hannibal teased, purposefully nudging the small of his back. “As much as I adore your spur of the moment invitation,” Hannibal pushed him up against the available corner. “Where are we going?”

“To the end of the line. I just need to avoid running into him.”

Hannibal’s mouth twitched a little. The topic of Malcolm Bright had yet to disappear. It would be best if they dropped it. If they just avoided the area then he wouldn’t see Mr. Bright again.

This is New York it should be easy not to run into him he thought.

There was no sense in actively seeking out the man. As long as he didn’t threaten his and Hannibal’s life here they could coexist. Maybe he could call in some anonymous tip to help solve the case.

Malcolm stumbled as he approached the subway’s ticket machine. He’d never been permitted to ride the public transportation before which made it one of the best places to hide out from his mother and avoid the call of his father. All he wanted was some space and time to properly think and yet he felt at a complete loss of how he was even supposed to work this damn machine. And then there was the issue of having to figure out what car he was going to take. How far did he even want to go? It had to be easier than his frazzled brain was making it out to be, but every time he glanced over at the other machine to follow by example he was glared down.

I should’ve taken a cab, he thought.

It had to be fate or some strange coincidence that as he turned away from the machine in defeat he spotted the mysterious FBI man pushing through the turnstile.

“Excuse me,” he called out without realizing that he was moving forward. “Excuse me! You with the red plaid shirt!”

The man’s head looked down as if seeing what he was wearing then perked up. Halting his step he turned around. Those blue-green eyes widened a fraction behind his squared glasses.

“It is you” he huffed in relief. He wouldn’t be able to stop reliving the embarrassment if it had been someone else.

What in the world was going on? How could he be found so easily by the one person he had been actively avoiding?

Will fought the urge to check himself for a tracking device. He was more than grateful that Hannibal had gone ahead of him in line. Where Hannibal was at this moment couldn’t be telegraphed to Mr. Bright.

“I must ask, are you stalking me Mr. Bright?” he asked calmly.

Mr. Bright's cheeks flushed. “Believe it or not this is a coincidence.”

Doubtful.

“I never got your name last time.”

“Will,” he said automatically. He knew that he should’ve said a different name, any other name would have been better. He’d never been great with aliases. It was already hard enough to know who he really was at times.

“Are you investigating nearby?” Mr. Bright asked with a quick glance around the station.

“No, just enjoying the day,” he said as he moved them out of the way of the incoming crowd. “You?”

“The same.”

Despite the noisy environment, silence rang between them. With each second ticking away he wanted to find Hannibal. *Is he stalling? Are there others in here waiting to arrest us?* He thought while schooling his face in the same way Hannibal often did.

He’d been naive to think that this man wouldn't have tried looking into him. This would not end well either for him or Mr. Bright. *I wish I had something sharp.*

In a quick assessment he noted Mr. Bright’s lean built. If it came down to it he was certain that he could kill this man with his bare hands.

“I apologize if I'm keeping you from something.”

“Not at all,” he said, looking past the man for any undercover officers.

Once more the buzzing of Mr. Bright's phone seemed to miraculously save him.

“If we keep running into each other like this I can count on seeing you around.”

“Wait,” he didn't want Will to leave so soon. “I would like to talk about a few things.”

“Now?” Will asked, motioning to the man's still buzzing phone.

“How about tomorrow? We can talk over some coffee. *Victors* at nine?” The buzz of his phone stopped.

Will seemed to be contemplating something before responding: “Alright Mr. Bright.”

“Malcolm. You can call me Malcolm.”

With a small chuckle, Will smiled. “Alright, I'll see you tomorrow Malcolm.”

Watching Will disappear up the steps leading to the street, his heart thumped as though he had run a marathon. Again his phone insistently buzzed in his pocket. It was both a relief and annoyance that the call saved them from the awkward silence. Maybe he needed to brush up on his conversation skills.

Mother would approve of that, he thought, pulling out his cellphone. Five missed calls and ten unread texts. I must be wearing her down.

“I thought I had lost you” Hannibal teased as he slipped back to Will's side. From a safe distance he had observed the whole interaction and frankly, he was disappointed in this Malcolm Bright. Had he known that he was speaking with Will Graham, a supposed deceased wanted man would it have been more of an entertaining display? He'd been curious about what Will would do in such a crowded environment. Would he have lured the man away to somewhere more secluded or would he have made quick work of him while the mindless drones hurried on by?

“I knew you'd be around.”

“You are not going to question my actions after being left alone for all of five minutes?”

“I don't think you are that skilled to accomplish much in that time.”

“Is that a challenge?” He smirked.

Will shook his head. “Forget I said anything,” he slipped his hand along his back.

“Craving public affection?”

“Just checking.” Will’s hand ran along each seam of his coat. “It’s too strange to run into him so often. New York is hardly a small town.”

“Fate perhaps?”

“For his sake, I hope not.”

“Anything of importance I should know?”

“We’re meeting at Victor’s for coffee tomorrow.”

“Oh?” He raised a brow.

“Don’t get any ideas. Times like this I wish we got propper smartphones” he said towards his burner phone.

The tip of his finger caught Will’s chin lifting it up just so their eyes could meet. He was truly a mess of a man sometimes but that was just one aspect that he adored about Will Graham. The way that he unraveled in normal social settings urged on playful teasing. Outside of his purpose Will appeared like a scared lamb to the untrained eye. From the very first time they met he knew that he was indeed a lion.

He let his other hand follow the plane of Will’s back in a similar fashion to his own previous actions. Will remained still but not rigid under his touch. They were entwined in so many ways that even doubts from another lifetime could hardly tear them apart now.

“It appears that you are not bugged as well” he whispered before stepping back. “I was thinking perhaps duck for tonight’s dinner.”

Giddy was not a word anyone would use to describe him, but for the strangest of reasons Malcolm did feel something along the lines of giddy as he walked through the doors of Claremont. It was a weird sensation that highly contrasted the barred doors, and the guarded passageways he passed. Even the guard who had watched over his father for several years, Mr. David, seemed to be questioning his unusually good mood. Malcolm knew he had to tamper it down, but it was as if this good feeling was an erupting volcano.

Take a breath and push it down, he told himself. It was the same thing he always told himself before stepping into the room that his father was kept. Usually the feelings he was trying to contain were hurt, regret, and rage.

Nodding to Mr. David the steel door opened with a loud *click* .

“My boy.” His father’s eyes lit up as he jumped up from his chair like an excitable golden retriever. His father was not some cute cuddly animal, he was a vicious and manipulative man; that was yet another thing he had to remind himself of.

“What,” his father’s smile broadened. “What are you doing here?” He glanced towards Mr. David as though he wanted to thank the man for bringing him in.

It had been maybe a week since he’d seen his father. Perhaps that was the longest he’d ever been able to ignore him since he returned to New York.

“It’s not my birthday, you know.” His father chuckled as he made his way to the edge of the red line painted across the floor. He really did look like an old golden retriever with the chain attached to him clanging as he steeped too far.

Why he had come this time was still unknown to him. It just sort of became the pattern to come to him like this.

“H-how’s the NYPD?” His father asked, fingers dancing against each other as if he had no better use for them. As if they weren’t the hands of a man who has killed innocent people and would’ve continued to do so if he hadn’t said anything...If he hadn’t called the police back then.

“Surely you didn’t come all this way to give me the silent treatment.”

“I’m not sure why I came,” he said at last, allowing his feet to move about the side of the room.

“Well you know I’m always glad to see you. And you seem to be in a good mood today.” His father laughed. “A father should know that much about his son.” He beamed.

“It’s nothing.”

“Is it an exciting case?” His father mimicked his pacing. “Do share with the class.”

“No. The case is... is not important right now.”

“So just came for a chat?” Somehow he looked even more pleased.

“I could always leave,”

“No. No. Of course you’re welcome to stay, this is just a bit out of the norm. You know our little song and dance” he said swaying along to some show tune in his head.

Maybe it’s time to end it. he thought but he knew that there would always be something that pulled him back. Dr. Martin Whitly, The Surgeon, his father was the biggest magnet in the world to him. Even years of training with the FBI couldn’t keep him away long enough.

He really should’ve had a plan or a lie to be here. It would have eased this strange silence between them. Inside he was still trying to contain the flutter of unexplained happiness.

“Oh?” His father said after some time. Clapping his hand so loud that it slightly startled him his father pranced around the room. “This is about someone special isn’t it?”

“What?”

“You met someone. That’s it!” He puffed up his chest like a proud bird.

“Technically I meet a lot of people every day.”

“No, this is different.” His father made a large circular motion around him. “This is different. Tell me who it is. Anyone I know?”

He frowned.

“Probably not.” He scratched his beard. “Doesn’t matter.” He waved the thought away. “Tell me everything. Is she tall or short? Is she more a fan of Freud or Jung?”

“Dr. Whitly-” he raised his voice.

“Malcolm, you used to talk to me about anything. Back then,” He smiled fondly. “You helped me see the outside world through your eyes.”

Of course he remembered those days back when for the oddest of reasons he felt like he could go to his father for anything. It was so strange knowing who this man was, being reminded of how he was the monster’s son, and yet holding proper family memories of camping and fancy dinners that his father always found a way to make it less dull. It was as though they were two different people back then. Now he knew the complicated truth of who Dr. Martin Whitly was and yet he wanted to separate those aspects of him.

“I came to check up on you.”

“Malcolm,” his father pouted.

“I’m meeting with someone tomorrow” the words slipped out as if they had a mind of their own.

“Oh? So you really did come to your old man for some advice. Well, I’m not prepared.” He hurried over to his desk as though amongst the various medical journals would be books on romance. “Off the top of my head, I can say be yourself. And always pay for the first date. Chivalry doesn’t have to be dead in this day in age you know.”

“It’s not a date” he huffed before leaving.

Meeting

“Aren’t you excited?” Hannibal asked, stepping into the bedroom.

Containing an eye roll so hard that he was sure he would never see again, Will focused on his own reflection. “So excited that it circles around to become panicked.” For the millionth time he fumbled with his tie. Well, technically it was one of Hannibal’s less horrendous ties. “This is a horrible idea.”

“Yes,” Hannibal’s eyes raked over him. “You haven’t worn a tie in so many years, perhaps we should do without it for today.”

“You know what I mean,” he said, although thankful that his neck was freed from the increasing possibility of accidentally strangling himself.

“It appears that this man has an interest in you.”

“That’s hardly a good thing.” He reached to tussle his hair but stopped himself as he caught Hannibal’s frown. “This could be a trap.”

“Or a date” Hannibal noted, his voice teetering on amused and spiteful.

“That is the furthest thing from reality.”

“With all your mental gymnastics I doubt you noticed how all his attention was on you back at the station.”

“That’s-”

“Dear Will, you took quite some time to notice my affection towards you.”

“Well,” he rubbed the back of his neck. Talking about this with Hannibal was somehow embarrassing. “I just want to know what he knows about us and the case.”

“You should not be so serious, dear Will. Unless you are interested-”

“No,” he said without hesitation.

He couldn’t even entertain the idea. Hannibal would literally eat anyone who would try to take him in any sense of the word. In another world, one where he was still part of the FBI and never met Hannibal, maybe he could’ve entertained the idea of being with someone like Malcolm. In this reality, however, he didn’t want that. Even so, he felt as though he’d never gone out to coffee with someone before. Had he? Things like getting coffee felt so foreign to him.

It has been a while. He and Hannibal hardly had the luxury of staying in a public place long enough to enjoy a cup of coffee. Or maybe that was just his paranoia. That nagging inner voice that told him any prolonged activity would evoke the world to cave in on them.

“You will be fine. Just be your charming self.”

“I wouldn’t consider myself charming,” he scoffed. “Are you trying to get rid of me? Have you grown tired of me?”

Arms wrapped around his waist pulling him into a possessive hold. “I could never grow tired of your brilliance.”

For the millionth time, Malcolm had to hold down his hand in some attempt to stop the tremors. This was ridiculous. Beyond ridiculous. He’d taken his father’s advice on cases but never anything involving his personal life, not that he had much of one to begin with, and yet he felt ill-prepared for a simple conversation over coffee with Will. His hand itched to call his father or ask Gil to call him into the station to go over the files again. He should’ve been working right now anyway.

Like a dog with separation anxiety, his head jerked up at the sound of the front door’s bell chiming.

There he is. He thought, taking in the sight of the man he’d been waiting for as he motioned for Will towards their table.

There was something about the way Will carried himself that made him blend in and stand out all at once. Maybe it was the plaid button-up with rolled up sleeves that had just the right amount of wrinkles that it showed he had ironed beforehand but wasn’t stiff enough to worry about the effort ruined along the way to this meetup. Or perhaps it was the glasses that framed his mesmerizing eyes as he read the menu.

“This has to be one of the fanciest coffee shops I’ve ever been in,” Will remarked.

“Really?” he asked. It had been the top suggestion in his search for coffee houses. “I honestly don’t know a thing about coffee,” he admitted. Going to coffee shops had been just another too normal of an experience. It was always old brew in the station or lavish cappuccinos handed out as if party favors at elite brunches.

“That makes two of us” Will chuckled and he couldn’t help but want to lean in. Will’s smile, even a half one was entrancing. *Genuine* he realized. He’d grown up with so much false air of content happiness that Will was a stark contrast.

Will seemed to be a man more at home with nature than a bustling city. He could picture Will on a farm or a cabin in the woods. Will did have the muscle make-up for that sort of life. And there were scars peppered along his exposed forearms. There were stories etched all over Will and he wanted to know them all.

That realization took him aback slightly. He really wasn’t the type of person who wanted to know more about the people in his life. Maybe that was because he had filled that space in his head with case after case. If asked point-blank to recite Dani’s birthday or how old Gil

was he couldn't say with certainty; which to many was horrible considering he did care about them. And yet he'd never felt this need to connect with anyone as strongly as right now with Will. With everyone else it felt like an uphill battle to connect on the most basic things.

"And who drops twenty bucks on a single cup?" Will's eyes flicked up and down in a quick assessment of who he was with. "I suppose you could afford it."

"I hate to say it but most of this," he motioned to his overdressed self. "Is a creation of my wealthy overbearing mother." He nearly bit his lip the second he ended his sentence. Will was a total stranger one that could look up his past employment and discern who he really was. So why was he willingly giving out information about his family?

Will chuckled again. "I had an overbearing mother too but unfortunately not the wealthy kind." Slowly Will leaned forward and whispered, "If you are not opposed to 'roughing it' I can show you a better place."

"I have no problem leaving," he said, feeling his ears heat up a little.

Why does this feel so easy? This has to be a trap. Will thought as he watched the reflection of the windows they passed in his peripheral vision.

So far there was no indication that Malcolm had a wire on or that there was a hidden police car staked out across the street. He knew so many of the tricks so either Malcolm's deceit was either extremely well hidden or currently didn't exist. It was safer to believe the former. He'd be ready for it. The feel of steel in the inner pocket of his jacket tapping against him as he walked whispered escape plans.

He did feel better getting away from the location Malcolm had set up. If there was someone following them it would take a few minutes to get to settle in this new location. And the solid concrete surroundings would assist in disrupting the audio just enough. Even the narrow roads here proved to be advantageous to him.

Malcolm had yet to tear his eyes away from him. This was definitely ridiculous. Perhaps he'd feel better if he was acting like a lure for Hannibal instead of leading him to a quaint bar that was way more his speed than a lavish coffee house. Drawing up the bar's blueprints in his mind he marked the backways and second escape route. If he didn't make it out of this Hannibal knew what to do.

"I Didn't realize you were an alcoholic," Malcolm said, double-checking his watch if it had miraculously turned from mid-morning to late afternoon in the span of their walk.

"Believe it or not this place serves the best breakfast and you don't look like the sort of person who'd be against a drink or two."

"Guilty though it is still far too early. Perhaps another night."

“Is that a formal invite?”

Every time he noticed the pinkening of Malcolm's ears he couldn't help wanting to tease. *Perhaps I have spent far too much time with Hannibal*, he thought holding the door open.

Seedy would be the word his mother would use to describe this place. Thoroughly it lacked sufficient lighting, leaving the space in a hazy dim. The abundant seats were each dusted with a fine coat of peanut shells. At night it was probably teeming with walks of life from all of New York. At ten a.m. however, there sat a few older gentlemen, veterans he assumed based on their topic of conversation.

“Too rough?” Will asked, settling into the nearest stool.

“Not at all. It has character.”

“That it does. Word to the wise no omelets.” Will slid the somehow sticky laminated half-sheet menu towards him.

“Thanks.”

Silence covered them once more as their orders had been filled. He didn't care for it. This silence put him on edge. It made every little sound echo.

“Bring your friends in here often?” Malcolm asked.

“I can honestly say no.”

The relationships, platonic or otherwise, he had never felt real. There had always been more pressing matters like lessons to write or pointing people in the right direction for a cold case. Many nights it had just been him, his dogs, and books. There was no time to work on his interpersonal relationship skills. Even Alana Bloom, whom he considered the closest to when he was lecturing at the academy, only entered his hemisphere of thought when curiosity struck. She, like everyone else, was closer to a colleague than a friend back then.

And once he stopped teaching, once he was called back to the field by Jack, once he met Hannibal; then the crimes and books and lectures that filled his head were replaced. Hannibal occupied his mind. Even now as he listened to Malcolm talk he wanted to go home; walk through the door and be greeted by the scent of cooking.

What did Malcolm expect out of this meeting?

Based on Malcolm's tight-lipped expression perhaps this was too public of a place to talk about an ongoing case.

Time had passed and still there was no turn in conversation that could lead him into an admission of who he was. There wasn't even another "customer" who came to sit in the back of them.

Is he buying time? If so, for what?

"Do you have any hobbies?" he asked, pulling up the mental flashcard on small conversation topics.

"I collect," Malcolm said before taking a sip of his coffee.

"What do you collect?" It was apparent that he wasn't the only one out of practice in small talk.

"I probably shouldn't say."

"It can't be that bad. Back when I was living in the countryside I collected various fish lures and stray dogs."

Malcolm smiled. "I would've enjoyed having a pet I think." Malcolm reached for his cup but then stopped. "Mother didn't approve of dogs or any animal for that matter."

"Needed to keep the Persian rugs intact?"

"Exactly" Malcolm chuckled.

"New York isn't a place for dogs or so I'm told."

"Well, it can't compare to the country's fresh air and open space. You must miss them."

"I do. All seven."

"That is quite the collection." Malcolm beamed. "What made you come to the city?"

"It's a long story." He paused to take a long sip of his water. "You have to tell me what you collect, otherwise it'll keep me up all night."

"It sounds odd to most people." Malcolm began rearranging the cutlery beside him.

"I'm nothing like most people. Nothing you say would be odd enough for me to leave. Though if you leave I'm charging your portion to the NYPD."

Malcolm seemed shocked at his own laughter. "I don't think they would appreciate that."

"Then you will just have to tell me about this collection of yours."

"I collect blades, well weapons of all periods of time and countries. It's a bit of a museum."

“That’s hardly strange.” Will smiled wondering when the last time he had gone to a museum just to look at some artifacts and not because of a murder case.

Bzz Bzz the ringing made them both jump a little.

“Sorry,” Malcolm said, glancing at the phone as though it were an enemy. “I don’t want to go but I have to.”

“Another case?” he asked more than ready to pursue a lead.

“I wish it’s... It’s a family thing.”

“Say no more.” He said but quickly memorized the number before it disappeared.

Hesitantly Malcolm stood. “Thank you for meeting me today.”

“Next time we should make it longer.”

“Definitely.”

“What do you want, Dr. Whitley?” He all but growled the second he stepped into his father’s cell.

“Come on my boy,” his father beamed. “You didn’t answer my call so can I assume that the date went well?”

“It...” He ran a hand through his hair. “You can’t bother me about that sort of thing. Of course it’s my fault for even saying anything before.”

His father’s smile wavered slightly. “It was bad?”

“No, it wasn’t.” What he would’ve given to have a drink right now. “And it wasn’t a date.”

“Well, now I’m just confused.” His father laid his head in the palm of his hands in a pose that he assumed was supposed to come across as endearing. “Come on, tell your dear old dad how it went. Where did you go?”

“I had to cut my meeting short because of someone’s phone call.”

His father tutted. “That is not proper dating behavior.”

“Did you really call just to bother me?” He huffed.

“I just want to be a part of your life. I was once.”

It was a kind sentiment but his father was manipulative and at times it was hard to tell what he was scheming. Malcolm felt as though they were often playing 3D chess when it came to even the simplest of conversation.

“You are effectively the biggest part of my life.” He shook his head, taking in the humor in his constant seeking of validation from his Serial Killer father. “I don’t know why I don’t just leave.”

“Because we have so much fun together,” he said, returning to a beaming smile.

There were so many things he wanted to say, thousands of words in millions of combinations resting on his tongue but none came out.

“Since you’re here I should mention that your sister found another body.”

“What?” he asked, fishing out his phone. There was no call from Gil or Dani, not even JT. It wouldn’t be the first time Gil conveniently forgot to call him in.

“You know my girl, such a go-getter.” He motioned towards the T.V. where Ainsley stood describing the “horror show” that her team had discovered.

Growling he hurried out of Claremont.

Hannibal was hardly the sort of person that was drawn to the Television. For most of his life he ignored the majority of shows and nonsense reported on. He’d always been more partial to books and finding entertainment in the heads of his clients. But being on the run for years had opened him up to leaving it on in the background whenever Will wasn’t around. The Television had been both a blessing and a hindrance in the first year of their lives here; with Will kneeling at the screen as though it were an altar, eyes frantic at the mention of any crime. More than once he’d thought about tossing it in the nearest dumpster, but as he sat down to enjoy his meal he caught the familiar face of the woman reporter on the screen.

Another victim? He mused, sliding his sliver of steak across the residual blood.

The reporter reminded him so much of Freddie Lounds the way she got as close to the crime scene as possible. If it weren’t for the more burly man behind the yellow tape he was sure that she would’ve shown closeups of every square inch of the scene. Nostalgia hit him as he took a sip from his wine.

“This has been Ainsley Whitly reporting.”

“I feel as though we are missing out on the fun.”

Along the way home Will felt as if he had failed. What information he gained was not strong enough to decipher if Malcolm knew who he really was or not. He should’ve left things be. What was he trying to get out of this charade? What could he get out of it?

As he reached for the doorknob the door opened.

“Heading out?” he asked a coat clad Hannibal.

“Yes, we are.” Hannibal’s arm snaked around his, pulling him in the direction he’d come. “A new body has been found,” he explained.

A new body? A part of him felt a sting of anger at Malcolm for lying. Or maybe he didn’t know about this new victim.

Malcolm didn’t appear to be at the scene once they arrived. A crowd had gathered around the building as the larger detective he’d seen at the aquarium held his ground just past the yellow police tape.

This attack didn’t present as neatly as the previous one. As best as they could the police tried to block the sight, but the body was still out in the open. Splayed over the steps, brain matter dotted the surroundings like gruesome confetti.

How all this fit together eluded him. Deep in his gut there was a connection between this case and the last. There was a serial killer loose in New York.

His mouth watered at the display. It was hardly considered a work of art but the concave edges of the body spoke to him; whispering what had been taken. Hannibal ached to pick from the leftovers like a vulture. There was still so much meat left to fill both him and Will. He wouldn’t act so desperate. When the time was right he would provide the most nourishing meal.

Will shifted beside him. Hannibal knew the look in his eyes and the tension looming off Will as he held himself back from running headfirst into the scene. Intertwining their fingers he steadied him, pulling back into the thick of the crowd as the man he’d seen from a distance at the station arrived.

Malcolm Bright.

“We should go,” Will whispered, turning his head into the nook of his neck.

Placing a hand further to shield him, Hannibal watched Mr. Bright for a few seconds more.

Studying his walk, the tremor in his hand, but more importantly how he looked at the scene neither shying away nor reveling in the sight.

There was more to Malcolm Bright.

A thought hit him as he pulled Will back into the darkened corner; *Who would this man be to them? A roadblock? A plaything? Or a kindred spirit?*

Problem Solving

“Ouch” Will exclaimed, snatching his finger.

“That is a bad habit of yours,” Hannibal said, immediately going for his hand.

He shot the man a look. They both knew that this habit was in part due to him. If he hadn't brought him to that scene last night then he wouldn't be unconsciously picking at his cuticles until they bled like this. It was risky going there. Malcolm could've seen Hannibal. It would be comically easy to pin a few bodys onto Hannibal. The NYPD would hardly care that these killings didn't fit Hannibal's style if it meant capturing someone so notorious while being able to sweep these deaths under the rug in one motion.

Staying silent he watched as Hannibal applied pressure to the side of the minuscule cut, a dot of red blossoming into a beaded drop before flowing over. The spark in Hannibal's eyes always made him shiver. As if it were the remains of a fine dish Hannibal took the finger into his mouth.

The action was one he didn't even bat an eye at. The man was a bloodhound able to sniff out something wrong instantly. Although he hated to admit it he felt some strange pride in knowing he would gladly eat him if he offered.

“I'm going out today,” he said, his voice wavering ever so slightly.

Those sharklike eyes stared up at him. Why he found them so entrancing he couldn't tell but he did.

“I need to know what's going on with this case. I'm practically solving it blind.”

“I know,” Hannibal said, licking his lips. “Should I make your lunch to-go?”

“You're ridiculous,” he chuckled. “I will be back as soon as possible.”

There was something on Hannibal's mind, Will could see it in those sharp eyes, but there was no time to dissect it. With everything yesterday He felt as though someone had started a countdown. Whatever Hannibal was thinking had to wait a little longer. There would always be time between them later.

Just for now I have to go, he thought, taking one last look at Hannibal returning to his drawing. Pencil gliding over paper made it seem so peaceful. Although he ached to fall into the seat beside him and listen to him describe the image he was conjuring from his mind palace he closed the door.

Adored would be the perfect way to describe how he viewed Will. He adored the tunnel vision he got when working the case. Seeing the man rush out of the door no longer phased

him. The slight doubt that he had of him never returning had disappeared some time ago. They were linked, bonded in a way that could never be severed.

There was a hunger in him, one that he had held since perhaps the first formidable years of his life. That hunger dictated aspects of his life from the clothing to the cadence of his voice. For so long he lived with the hidden hunger moving about in the finest tailored human suit he could muster. Then Will Graham appeared, the one person who could see him as he was. It would be fair to say that he hungered for the man the moment they met.

Unlike so many others that ended on his plate, the ache he had towards Will was stronger. Those were the beginning stirrings of something that one might consider love. An all-consuming love. Perhaps his love was the sliver of a redeemable trait he possessed amongst the laundry list of his evil deeds. To have someone that he actually paid mind to unnerved him. It was a weakness that should've been cut out completely, but he couldn't do so. In much of the same way he'd changed Will, Will had changed him. And yet the hunger remained. A cruel starving pang that demanded to consume the very mind he loved. Often he'd fantasized about unspooling Will's thoughts as though twirling a fork in his pasta. These were wicked thoughts, ones that he fought against over and over just so he wouldn't be left alone on the run surrounded by imbeciles. Will was his match, a beacon amongst the ever-changing landscape.

Although he believed there was no one else like Will he wondered if this profiler could satiate his hunger. Would that be what Will intended if their disguises were removed? If his human suit fell apart once more, would Will offer Mr. Bright on a silver platter for him?

Setting his pencil to the side he admired his work. A feral-looking Will stared up at him from the paper, bloodied hands holding out Mr. Bright's head.

His stomach demanded to feast.

Quiet. The house was so quiet whenever Will left.

He smirked to himself recalling the first time Will had to leave their little hideout. How he reached for the doorknob like someone with agoraphobia, and how he looked the definition of guilty. It had been nothing short of a miracle that Will hadn't been arrested for suspicious behavior.

His fingertips shuffled through the box of recipes that he had to reassemble since that night on the cliff's edge. It still felt somewhat odd not having his rolodex to match up with the dishes. He could never operate in the same way as before Jack Crawford had searched high and low in the remains of his home and office. Just thinking about that man's grubby hands all over his things put him on edge. The one solace he had was the fact that Jack could never place his hands on Will again.

"But Malcolm Bright" he spoke to the air, fingers dancing between two dishes. Malcolm was becoming an increasing presence in their lives. Soon he'd have to introduce himself.

This wasn't one of his better ideas, there was no need for anyone to point out that fact. It would only take a matter of hours for Jack to come snatch them if he tipped off the police. That couldn't happen, not after somewhat fashioning a life for himself.

"Couldn't stay away?" Malcolm greeted his face a mix between inviting excitement and concern. It still seemed so strange to have gained a friend, or whatever Malcolm thought they were. He still hadn't lowered his guard. Malcolm wasn't an idiot. If given the right information he would make the connections to the truth.

"They should get better security" he suggested, turning his eyes back to the scene at hand.

"Maybe, but then I wouldn't be able to come in as easily as you did."

He couldn't help smirk. "I've missed this," the words escaped his mouth before he could stop himself. Thankfully it seemed as if Malcolm was lost in thought.

Malcolm stared at the now drained tank, yellow caution tape border around it as if the flimsy material could do anything to deter someone. He always found it strange how the world didn't stop after events like this. It had to move on regardless of murders still running free. The world didn't care one way or another about the victims. It was *his* job to care or care enough to help bring an end to these murders.

Sparing a sideways glance he wondered if Will thought the same or if he, like some of his ex-FBI coworkers only saw the job as a game, gaining points for every "bad guy" taken down. It put a sour taste in his mouth to know that at one point he had been in a similar mindset, hell he wasn't all that much better thriving off the thrill of the chase. Too often he tossed his life with reckless abandon, but he'd always thought it was worth it in the end.

"I'm curious. What do you see?" Everyone had a unique way of looking at a crime scene. It was about time that he knew what Will had seen that day.

Taking off his glasses for a moment Will wiped them on the edge of his sleeve before quickly replacing them. "I was wondering the same thing."

Again Malcolm looked at the empty tank. "I see mostly questions needing to be answered."

"If only that was the only thing I saw" Will mumbled his mind moving like a pendulum erasing the caution tape and refilling the tank. Swing by swing he placed the scene back in time until he felt as if he'd stepped into another person's shoes. This was as simple as breathing to him.

Setting the stage. I am in her shadow, where I have been for a week or so. This is my chance. Not a soul to see as I bash in her head. It's quite effective. Only one strike is needed to silence her. This is not personal but the next one might be. This is a rehearsal to get everything in place for the big show. The lights in her eyes fade so fast and I must act. Cutting her chest

with precision to find what I need, The rest is set dressing. She belongs among the beauty of the tank. She deserves to be seen.

Watching Will work was both insightful and frightening; the way he mumbled to himself as he moved about the space. Malcolm had never seen anyone work like this before. Usually he was the one everyone stared at whenever he had some epiphany about a case. Now he was the one staring as Will periodically stopped and lifted his head scanning something that he could not see.

“...This is my design.” He caught the tail end of Will's muttering, sending a shiver down his spine. “This wasn't a crime of passion or financial gain.” Will's words pulled him closer to the empty tank.

“The display of the body,”

“-Was a message, yes but it was not one of romantic revenge. Wronged lovers don't usually go this far to make a point. He wanted her to be seen.”

He had thought as much when Gil had suggested the ex-boyfriend was the culprit. The next best suspect was Dorean's stepfather, but that didn't sit right either. Dorean had been familiar with her killer but not close.

“This was a warning.”

Will nodded.

“But for who?”

“I'd need more to figure that out.”

How did this fit with yesterday's case? Was it another warning? “What made you decide to come here?”

“I needed another look. I assume you did too.”

“Yes.” He sighed. “I thought there'd be something we overlooked.” He pulled out a file tapping it twice before handing it over.

“I won't tell anyone you had this.”

He blushed knowing that Will now knew another point of his recklessness.

Recklessness was needed now that another body dropped. If what he thought was true Gil could overlook his overstep in bringing Will onto the case. Two profilers were better than one.

“I caught the news of another victim last night” Will mentioned carefully flipping through the file.

He felt a twinge of guilt for some strange reason. It wasn't as though he had intentionally hid last night's victim. And Will didn't need to know the fine details the NYPD had gathered, but he felt compelled to tell him.

"It was a brutal head trauma." Simultaneously he wished he had borrowed a few pictures of yesterday's scenes to compare. "The team thinks it's a robbery gone wrong or a hit but-"

"-You think something different?" Will asserted, lining up one of the photos with the tank.

"I don't have proof yet, only a feeling," he admitted as Will returned the photo back to the file.

"Feelings are nothing to deny. They help point us in the right direction more times than not."

He didn't expect to hear that. More than a few times his gut led him into near trouble or near death. Most of the team viewed his process as a liability that had to be closely monitored. His views weren't enough Gil needed proof.

Will glanced behind him. "Perhaps we should continue this conversation elsewhere." Turning around he saw a few aquarium visitors staring at them. If any more came Gil might rush down to stop him from sticking his nose in the wrong place. Getting caught with Will would've been a really hard thing to explain to Gil and the rest of the team. They might've thought of him as a traitor.

"I know a place," he offered.

"As long as it doesn't have overpriced coffee." Will smiled, handing back the file.

There were two things that Hannibal noted as he moved about the outside world: one, his old methods of blending in had not diminished in the slightest and two, Will needed to be more alert of his surroundings. From within the crowd he watched the two casually moving with the flow. He had to remain seated when Bright steadied Will as he tripped on the unfinished pavement. Seemingly Will brushed off the moment but his eyes caught the nimble fingers slipping into Bright's pocket as he righted himself.

He smirked wondering how often Will had pulled a similar stunt.

Diving into his other pocket Will pulled out his phone motioning Mr. Bright to go ahead of him.

His phone buzzed.

"You should be home" Will's voice came across the other end a bit annoyed.

"How do you know that I'm not?"

"I know what it feels like to have your eyes on me."

He smiled. "I'm afraid I didn't give you enough credit."

Will huffed "I will see you back at home."

"Everything alright?" Malcolm asked.

"Yes" he said internally clenching at the realization that he had rudely hung up on Hannibal. *I'm going to pay for that.* he thought, tucking the phone away. "Just needed to check up on someone."

Malcolm rose his brow ever so slightly

"Don't worry, it's not a coworker. Speaking of which, I was expecting your team to be right behind us."

"We're not exactly a package deal" Malcolm said rubbing the back of his neck. "I'm just a profiler. Practically a glorified visitor."

Will shrugged. "I know how you feel." He did.

Being on the field had left him in such a strange state of being needed while also being in the way. At the academy he felt more comfortable but even less useful. Jack Crawford was right about that position wasting away his potential but it had kept him semi-stable. Or so that's what he chose to believe. Every once in a while he felt bitter about being pulled back into the field back then. How different his life would've been if he just kept his nose in the books and taught was practically unimaginable.

"Does the FBI have interest in this case?" Malcolm asked, bringing him back to the present. It was not the first time Malcolm had asked this and it certainly wouldn't be the last.

"No. I'm just overzealous in my work."

Malcolm smiled.

Leading someone who was a stranger to where you lived was the first lesson in what not to do. It was simple if you didn't know a person, don't bring them home with you. So why he practically threw his literal door open for Will was just another break from his usually closed off life. He could count on one hand how many people he'd welcomed to his place. No one could accuse him of being a social butterfly or playboy bachelor.

"I sort of expected it to be bigger" Will teased, hanging up his jacket while he tossed his own against the chair in the kitchenet.

"Should I have brought you over to the vacation house instead?"

“If it was in the countryside I could have taught you how to fish.”

Will's eyes seemed to take in everything. Suddenly he felt insecure about the row of pills he needed to semi-function or the papers fanned out on the ground. Will bypassed all that finding his bed which stood unobstructed against the far window.

“I can explain those” he motioned to the restraints strapped against the headboard.

“I'd prefer you to explain your collection.” Will let out a low whistle, moving to the gawk at the display of historical weaponry.

Unable to contain both relief and excitement to talk about his collection he all but ran to the display. “Ancient weaponry reflects changes in production of metals and the needs of soldiers on the battlefield. Depending on the shape and the weight you can tell each tool's use. Did you know that the mace was developed in the Upper Paleolithic Period? It was one of the cheapest and effective weapons used for centuries.”

Luck seemed to be smiling on him today as a rounded man carrying wires approached the white van with *Channel 14 News* written in bold letters along its side. Approaching the man a waft of beef and cheese hit his nose. This man was one cheeseburger away from the need of double bypass surgery but lifesaving advice was not what he had come here for.

“Excuse me,”

The large man jumped smacking his head against the top of the van's roof. A muttered curse escaped his lips as he turned to face him.

“I'm looking for Ms. Ainsley Whitly.”

Defensively crossing his arms in front of his chest, the man looked him up and down. “I'm not passing on any more of those lawsuit things. I just work for her. And she is acting within her legal limits.”

“That is not the reason why I am here.”

“Then what are you some psycho?”

“If I were that would not be a wise choice of words” he smirked.

Blanching the man stepped back.

“I had an appointment with her.”

“Oh,” The man eased his grip on the door's handle. “Well, she's not here yet. Had some family thing.”

“Perhaps I’ve gotten the time wrong. Would you mind pointing me in the right direction of her office?”

The man looked to the van then to him. “This really isn’t about any legal trouble?”

“I assure you it is not. Just a simple meeting of a story I thought she might be interested in covering.”

Sighing, the man shoved the van door behind him. “It’s always about the next story with her,” he grumbled, “This way.”

Ever so charming he thought, following the man into the building.

Will would have an ulcer in this place, the all too horrendously bright interior and the workers buzzing around like bees.

“You can wait out here” the man gruffed, checking his watch.

“Thank you for your assistance.”

“Whatever.” As the man shuffled away Hannibal reminded himself that the man would not make a tasty dish.

Ms. Ainsley Whitly you do have a wonderful office he thought as he let himself in. It was a shame that people didn’t value a good lock in this company.

Ms. Whitly did appear more secure with her files, however; file cabinets locked tight and nothing personal out in the open. Pulling out the corner desk drawer he found a carton of cigarettes that had been handled multiple times without a single cigarette being used.

Resisting temptation I see.

Slipping the drawer back into place he checked the next. It contained a multitude of health bars. The following held bunched up papers of notes written in almost indecipherable handwriting. In the last drawer was a single book entitled *The Surgeon*. Very vaguely he remembered overhearing something about a serial killer who went by that name.

Careful to memorize the precise position the book was in he took it out. Tutting he flipped to the first dog-eared page. Several lines of the text had been struck out or highlighted. On the fourth dogeared page he found a photo depicting Ms. Whitly. A woman who based on the silver of resemblance leftover from most likely a face lift was her mother stood on her opposite side. Next to them was none other than Malcolm Bright. His position didn’t suggest that the two were dating, which meant they were related.

Siblings. Very interesting.

The photo had clearly been taken from a previous news article; neither of its subjects begrudgingly being placed in a book chronicling their involvement with the infamous Surgeon. The paragraph below the photo was not striked through or highlighted but cut from the book completely. In the crevasse was a cease and desist letter to the author.

A sound down the hall prevented him from inspecting the book further. The click of footsteps against the melonium flooring rang in the silence as he set the book back in order.

All is as it was. He nodded to himself. Gently he pulled the door open.

“Oh! You frighten me” A man wearing a competitor journalist badge exclaimed. “Is Ainsley in?”

“She will be in a moment. You’re welcome to wait out here in the meantime.”

“Thanks.”

Nodding he left just as easily as he’d entered.

“I should stop before we’re here all night,” Malcolm said, stopping himself from explaining the history of yet another piece of his collection.

“Perhaps that’s for the best.” Will smiled. “but it was enjoyable.”

Will's hand rested on his shoulder for a moment, sending a spark of joy through him. He barely minded feeling like a friendless idiot. Taking back his hand, Will checked his watch.

“Should we continue the investigation tomorrow?”

“I,” He took a look at the time. “How did it get so late?” He couldn’t believe that he had spent hours talking and that Will had listened intently the entire time.

“You know what they say about time flying when you’re having fun.”

Was this really fun for Will? He’d never had anyone show a fraction of interest in his hobby before.

“Would you like to stay for dinner?” he asked before remembering his place hardly had enough food for himself. In fact if he wasn’t mistaken the current occupant of his fridge was a box of day-old chow mein. “Take-out it only a call away,” he quickly suggested.

“Another night,” Will said, walking over to pick up his jacket.

“Do you need a ride or-”

“I am fine. Thank you.”

Why did he not want Will to leave? Unusually he was thrilled to have people out of his place. Will wasn’t like anyone he’d met before. Something about him...

“Your number-”

Will shook his head, hitting him with a pang of rejection. Will must’ve picked up on his disappointment as he stopped himself from opening the door to turn back.

“I don’t think that it's a good idea. You wouldn’t want your private number on my phone just in case.”

“Oh..” He felt like an idiot. He’d once been a part of the FBI, he should’ve known how easy phones could be compromised. “Right.”

“Should I meet you here tomorrow afternoon?”

His heart fluttered at the thought of Will wanting to come back. “Sure unless we see each other at the next scene.”

Will chuckled. “Whichever comes first then,”

Waving goodbye he thought it strange how the hours had passed uninterrupted. Digging out his phone from his coat he stared at the blackened screen.

When did I turn this off?

“Found anything interesting?” Hannibal asked as the click of the door punctured Violin Concerto No.2.

“Confirmation that he’s from a well-off family and that he has a hyper fixation on historical weaponry.”

“That sounds delightful.”

“He practically talked my ear off about it. We hardly discussed the case. And what did you do today?”

“Research of my own.” He motioned for Will to sit at the dining table. His findings would remain his secret until he knew Will’s plans for Mr. Bright. “ Hungry?”

“Very much so.”

Smirking, he laid the rack of lamb onto the table.

Borrowing

“A moment Malcolm,” Gil called him over the moment he stepped into the station. He still looked exhausted. He needed to solve this case before Gil started losing it due to the lack of sleep. “Is everything alright?”

“What?”

Gil scratched his beard. “Can we please have a moment of honesty?”

“Well, then I’d honestly have to say I’m never alright.” He smiled.

“I guess that’s true. But had there been, I don’t know developments with ...you know?”

“Dr. Whitly?” he whispered.

Gil nodded.

“No. Why?”

Gil sighed in relief. “Well, you’ve been absent from your usual spot.” Gil motioned to the meeting room. “And your mother had started asking about your workload.”

“It’s fine. I’ve been trying to get perspective on the case.”

“If you have any thoughts, I’m all ears. The aquarium case is getting colder by the minute. And the other,” he sighed.

“I haven’t found the connection yet.”

“You really think they are connected?”

“It’s a possibility.”

One of Gil’s brows rose.

“I’ll find proof,” he added quickly.

“Just don’t do anything you’ll regret and call your mother ”

As nice as it was to have Gil know him and his situation, he always felt weird about having a detective as one of his mother’s spies on him.

“Alright,” he said, hitting the elevator button.

The basement of the station was significantly colder. Rarely did he have to come down to the autopsy room. Edrisa had always been so willing with the information about the victims that he could piece together a strong profile from a few pictures alone.

He regretted spending all his time talking with Will about his collection last night. His views would've been helpful. Also he could've done with his moral support right now. Since he was little he had an aversion to the body lockers. Just glancing at them set off his claustrophobia. Such tight space. That's where most people went once they died. Layed on a cold steel table and shoved into a dark hole until it was time to be placed in a hole in the ground. Stilling his twitching hand he stepped a little closer.

"Edrisa?" He took another step into the room. "Edrisa? Anyone home?" His questions were met with silence.

Moving fully into the room he passed the steel beds to the small attached office.

Rummaging through Edrisa's stacks of papers he found full autopsies for both cases. All her little notes tucked inside would be of use to him and Will. Knowing that the alarm would be rung if he didn't let Edrisa know he was borrowing some things he left a note.

"Where are you anyway?"

It was so unlike her not to be here.

"You are very lucky that I know first aid," Hannibal smiled as he laid the first aid kit on the table.

"I'm a complete klutz but this is a first" Dr. Edrisa laughed, holding out her dominant hand to him. "Can you believe it? I work with a scalpel all the time and it's a fork of all things that got me."

"Accidents do happen to the best of us," he said, keeping special attention to the clock overhead. He didn't have much time for this little errand.

"It's embarrassing," she snorted. "Can't wait till the guys at the NYPD see me all bandaged up. I should come up with a cover story. Something epic."

He looked at her injury, nothing career-ending just a sub epidermis puncture. Planning out an accident had been difficult but he needed further information over Malcolm Bright.

"You work for the NYPD?" he feigned ignorance.

"And proud of it!" She smiled. "Thanks again for your help. I still can't believe that I ran into you like that."

"No trouble at all." Deliberately slowly he dressed her wound. "Anything interesting you're working on? I've always been curious about the profession."

"It's always interesting." She bit her lip but a second later she couldn't stop herself. "It's the best job in the world. I got a really cool team, especially one guy. He's all mysterious but nice. I swear I feel like a high schooler again when he's around."

“Is he a romantic prospect?”

“What? No. A friend. Bright’s just a close friend. Between me and you, I don’t think he’s the dating type. Lots of bats in the belfry if you know what I mean.”

“Well, it is good to have friends at work.”

“I’d say so. He’s a bit aloof though, helps with the disappearing act he does constantly.”

“And that’s not a concern?” he asked, securing the bandage in place.

“Oh on. He’s like a cat, always coming back.” Edrisa looked over his work as though it were art. The woman didn’t know the masterpiece that he could craft out of Malcolm Bright.

“Thanks again.”

“Of course.”

“Hannibal!” Will called out into the empty apartment. Each step he took echoed louder than the last. “Hannibal?” Frustration rose up at the sudden disappearance. They needed to stay out of public.

Rubbing his eyes he moved down the stairs into the kitchen.

“Will,” a hauntingly familiar voice spoke.

Everything inside him hardened but this was no time to freeze. He had to act. Grabbing a knife from the counter he turned to face the man he’d been dreading for years; Jack Crawford. Jack looked as he had the day he had called him back into the field. Jack smiled, stepping closer with arms stretched wide in an expectant hug.

“Will Graham,” his smile broadened.

Knife gripped tight he readied to strike. He knew where to hit the man to take him down quickly. Once he dealt with Jack he would get to Hannibal. There was no way Hannibal had been caught yet. Jack hadn’t reached for his gun yet. What was he waiting for? Was there a SWAT team waiting for his signal?

“You did it. Congratulations we got him.”

“Who?” he asked, eyes not straying from Jack. He wouldn’t be tricked.

Jack frowned. “Are you with me Will or are you lost in that head of yours?”

Blinking, he found himself back in his home in Virginia. The knife that was once in his hand now was a gun pointed not at Jack but at Hannibal. The look of betrayal in Hannibal’s eyes skewered his heart.

What is going on?

His head couldn't wrap around his setting. It was his old home, everything exact down to the hole in his chimney and the smell of dog food. Despite all that it felt wrong.

Jack was still beaming.

Pain radiated off Hannibal as he remained kneeling in front of him. Tears prickled those sharp eyes as they stared at the barrel of his gun.

This was wrong.

"You had us going for a while." Jack clapped a hand on his shoulder, making his aim shake. "We finally got the bastard." Jack laughed. "Wouldn't have without your help or yours."

Craning his neck he saw Malcolm walk in.

"All in a day's work." Malcolm flashed a smile at him.

"Would you like to take the shot?" Jack offered Malcolm his gun.

"Gladly."

"No!" he screamed as the shot fired. Then he was plunged into darkness. A seamless never ending fall stopped by the rush of cold water filling his lungs. This time there was no one to resuscitate him. Alone. He was alone.

Arms wrapped around him. Blindly he clawed at the embrace until Hannibal's voice broke through the dream haze. "Will."

Sweat covered his back, his heart pounding so loud in his ears that he wanted to shut out all sound. His head was still underwater.

"Breath in and out," Hannibal instructed. "Slow breaths."

Am I unraveling again? he thought, lungs reaching out for air. "Where?" he swallowed around the harshness of his throat. "Where were you?"

"Making breakfast. I thought to let you sleep in."

"Don't do that again." He laid his head against Hannibal's chest. Desperately he listened to the steady heartbeat for reassurance. He needed to put his head back into place.

Why now did he have a dream like that? When Jack showed up in his dreams it had always been Jack coming to kill them both.

"Do I need to find you a means to sleep peacefully?"

"No." Reluctantly he removed himself from Hannibal's chest. "What's for breakfast?"

Gil would have his head for disclosing so much information to Will but they need to solve this on their own. If this really was a serial killer another body would drop soon.

“Our greatest glory is not in never failing but in rising every time we fall- Ralph Waldo” Will recited this morning's affirmation.

“It's a decent quote.”

Will placed the card back down. “If not optimistic.”

“Are you not an optimist?”

“Sometimes I get tired of getting up after falling. Will rubbed his eyes.

“If you're not in the right headspace we could-”

“-No.” Will moved to join him in his living area space. Flopping down he thumbed through the first stack of papers.

All of this was too new. Things tended to move so fast as if he'd only had a few minutes to wrap up an investigation, find a culprit and throw away the key. With Will things slowed down with moments of silence that let him think. Actually think instead of processing as he was running from one thing to the next. He couldn't tell if that was good or not. He was so used to being caught up in the chaos of everything.

On scratches of paper Will began jotting similarities between the cases. Both had no signs of struggle so the victim knew the assailant. Both were public displays but the presentation differed. To most it wouldn't look to be connected at all aside from the common head trauma.

Again he shuffled through the photos Malcolm had provided. “To accomplish this the culprit had to be medium built, strong but not overtly. These acts he needed to accomplish with little attention drawn to himself. He cannot appear as a threat.”

“Where is the missing link?”

“This would be easier with all the necessary tools” he muttered.

The way Will bent over to inspect the finer details of the photo caused his long bangs to fall, covering his eyes from view. Without realizing it, he was moving closer. Hand moving slowly to push the loose strands aside but before he could complete the act Will moved back.

“Could I borrow a rubber band?”

“Sure.” He tossed it over.

“I didn’t realize how long my hair has gotten” Will said tying his bangs back.

With his hair in a small ponytail, Malcolm could see a long scar just above his right brow. The life Will had lived before moving here seemed so painful.

“What happened,” He tore his eyes away. “Nevermind.” Asking personal questions would be too invasive, they still hardly knew each other. This might be the only case they would work on together. It would be inappropriate to uncover Will’s past now.

“It’s fine.”

He lifted his eyes just in time to see Will caress the scar.

“I often forget about this one.” Will sighed. “Not the best moment in my life, but not the worst.”

“You really don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.” He didn’t want to do anything to make Will leave. *I’m always doing things that make people leave.*

Again Will traced the scar. “Someone really wanted to get into my head.”

“I’m glad they didn’t succeed.”

A smirk briefly graced Will’s lips as though recalling an inside joke before he picked up another piece of paper. “Good or Bad everything leaves a mark.”

Mark. “Wait. Mark!” He all but flipped the coffee table in his search for the close up photo of the first victim’s head. “Hand me the close up of the second victim’s head.”

Laying them side by side he could see the smallest mark. A strange square indent just above the temporal lobe.

“A sledge hammer could have made this” he pointed out to the edges of the mark.

“It does fit with the force of impact needed. The killing had to be as quick as possible.”

“How could no one see a man carrying around a sledgehammer?”

“Unless he had altered it. It wouldn’t be any bigger than could be concealed in a backpack.”

“But why these two victims?”

“Opportunity. He needed practice.”

“How long before the next one?”

“I’m not sure.”

His stomach started to growl so loud that he thought he'd die from breaking the serious mood.
“Sorry.”

“I think we both could use a break. ” Will took out the rubber band shielding his forehead scar once more. “Should we call in that take-out you promised?”

“Any preferences? Vegetarian options?”

“Don't worry, I am not a vegetarian.”

Hannibal looked over the fish placed so meticulously on the bed of vegetables. It was Will's favorite dish, a simple one that he'd reigned in the need to elevate it to a higher pallet.

The sound of Mozart over the radio was his only companion as he waited for Will's arrival.

Although there had never been talk of a curfew Will had made it a habit to return home precisely at seven-thirty. It was now seven twenty.

The fish's eyes stared at him, questioning why it was no longer alive. He was sure that Malcolm Bright would hold a similar expression if he were the one on his plate.

Mozart turned to Vivaldi as he continued to wait.

Seven thirty-one. Will was late. Will had never been late to dinner since they moved to New York.

Cracking his knuckles he remained in his seat. He glanced at his phone; no signs of a call or cryptic text.

The simple fish began to mock his discomfort. This morning he had reservations about letting Will meet with Bright. Easily he could've kept Will here.

Eight o'clock. The fish was cold, it stared at him with expectancy.

Eight-thirty.

Taking the fork in hand he brought it down hard on the fish's questioning eye.

The apartment was dark as he walked in but it wasn't empty. There was a stilled shadow against the couch.

“Is this where you flick on the light and ground me for being out late?” he asked the shadow.

“No. This is where you apologize.”

Scoffing, he placed his jacket onto the coat rack and made his way to the couch in the dark. They'd been in this apartment for so long that getting around like this was easy.

“Should I apologize for making you worry? Should I have called?” he asked, stopping right in front of Hannibal.

Hands easily slipped into his pocket turning them inside out in pursuit of his phone. The light off the phone cast an eerie hune onto Hannibal's face before shutting off and plunging them back into near darkness. Shallow breaths came to him as he stood still. All at once he felt trapped and freed as Hannibal grabbed onto his wrist, dragging him to what he assumed was his eye level. It was so hard to see the sort of face Hannibal was making in the dark, it was just a shadow that moved slightly. *No*, he realized. *Deliberately. This was a punishment.*

Hannibal smirked at the tinge of worry on Will's face. *Eat the rude* he thought neither releasing his grasp or making a second move. Waiting would always serve as a stronger punishment for Will than anything else. No wound or torture could compare for the moments of not knowing what was to come. Gladly he would drag this out until he felt every second he had waited.

The outside world continued to turn and the clock ticked on as they remained motionless. It was harder for Will to do so; he could feel the pulse under his thumb and the minuscule movements conveying discomfort to remain in this kneeled position.

He let his hand release and flutter down to Will's side still keeping him within reach.

Information gathered on Malcolm Bright stilled on his tongue. Saying it out loud felt as though it would act as gasoline to the sparks between the two. That couldn't happen. Just the thought made him want to retaliate. It made him long to carve his name into Will's chest or serve Malcolm Bright like a split-pig.

“Is your self-preservation going to be a problem?” The words leaked out in a forceful whisper.

“What are you talking about?”

“We both know you would do anything to ensure your survival.”

“Aren't we projecting a bit, Doctor Lecter?” Will sassed.

He could feel his ire rise. Will couldn't be trusted not to take in every stray. Why Malcolm Bright? Why now?

“Would you revert to a lapdog for the sake of him?” Hannibal hissed at him.

Will scoffed in disbelief at this sudden shift. All of this because he missed dinner?

“It has happened before” Hannibal accused.

“With Jack,” He didn't know how to finish that thought.

What seemed like a lifetime ago he had tried to shed the connection he had with Hannibal and the FBI. He'd run into the farthest corner of the woods and yet he'd returned to Jack, the FBI, and then to Hannibal. Was working with Malcolm lightening the darkness that had filled him? He didn't think so but if that was what Hannibal saw...

Flashes of his nightmare flickered like a strobe light behind his eyes.

"The fox has been given a bed in the hen house, but a fox can't change its nature."

"I don't need these metaphors, I know what I am." He fought to push that away. That wasn't who he was anymore. And this wasn't who they were anymore. Hannibal didn't need to talk in circles around him.

"Do you? Lately I see a poor imitation of the man I met years ago."

"You pushed me towards him, all but nailed me on his path!" he snapped.

"You speak as if you could ignore him" Hannibal said, wielding the truth like a blade.

"Shut up! *You* called it fate running into him!"

Hannibal traced the scar along his abdomen. "Is a silly thing like fate what brought you to me?"

"I don't know." How could he know? Just how much of his past life had been orchestrated by Hannibal had never been disclosed. And he'd hated him for that. Hated feeling as if his free will had been some illusion. But at the same time he held onto the plans Hannibal formed. He'd craved the guidance and assurance of plausible deniability. He liked knowing that if he jumped Hannibal would move the Earth to catch him. No longer was he a toy to manipulate.

"But that's what you think of this man?"

"Don't put words in my mouth!" He gripped onto Hannibal's knee. "You were the one who allowed this," he snarled. "And now what? Is the game no longer fun?"

"It would be if this were a game. If Bright was your plaything I would applaud each step you took. You've grown attached."

"Have I? Have *you* forgotten that I have an empathy disorder? I empathize with monsters. I get into their heads but you are the one in mine." He dug his fingers into Hannibal's knee. "What I do is for us! I'm keeping us free because instead of Cuba you moved us to New York."

"You were hardly a good liar. That much has not changed."

His fists begged to crash into Hannibal's face. "Or you're so emotionally compromised that you can't see the bigger picture."

"Does this big picture of yours include running from shadows forever?"

Again the image of his dream popped into his head. Slowly he released his grip on Hannibal.

"I'm a patient man, Will. You more than anyone should know that. I have lived in wait for so long. If asked, I would wait centuries to feed again."

"This is not some dance. I don't enjoy being led around. We are partners in this game if you just set aside your jealousy! I know what I'm doing. This isn't my first rodeo."

"Nor is this mine. In the end will you cast him aside or will you go off trying to save lives together?"

"Enough" he hissed. "I'm not the same as I was before but neither are you. We've grown, evolved."

"Or you are just trying to stall your becoming once more? Those instincts, the pulling of the blackness in your heart has been ignored thus far." Hannibal's grip on his side eased. "Has being with Malcolm reawakened the dead?"

"We were supposed to be dead," he whispered.

"You stepped onto a crime scene" Hannibal pointed out.

He sighed. "Why can't you just admit that you're jealous like a normal person? Why do we need to have a heart to heart in near darkness?"

"Your choice in new companionship is beneath you."

Will didn't understand why this outburst seemed so ridiculous to him at this moment. Perhaps it was the knowledge of how intertwined they were. The facts that lay in front of him for so long, that he couldn't and didn't want to survive without Hannibal.

"I prefer to be killed by your own hands rather than being turned in to appease this man," Hannibal said in a voice that sounded like defeat.

On legs of needles and pins, Will lifted himself to hover over Hannibal's shadowed figure before securing his hands around his neck.

"Is this what you want?" he whispered, his force not nearly hard enough to cause any damage, but not light in the least. "You think I'm running to Malcolm out of what? Some sense of normalcy? Reliving the glory days without you?"

His hands shook with rage at this dam act. Hannibal had been the one pushing him towards Malcolm. Maybe things wouldn't be like this if he let Hannibal be free after the fall. If they had gone on murderous sprees over the years would these words never be spoken? Would he not hold the same strange fear that Hannibal voiced?

He would be lying if he didn't miss the thrill or the surge of power in the act of murder. Had they resumed, would Malcolm be nothing more than a disposable roadblock?

All this darkness made it so hard to focus.

Clicking on the lamp was something he regretted instantly. The darkness around them acting as a protective barrier was now stripped away. Now he could see the rejection in Hannibal's face. It stung more than he could comprehend as if all his emotions had been enhanced tenfold. The rarity of true openness in Hannibal's face hardly could be registered over the overwhelming pressure behind his eyes, begging to be released in tears. He would rather have a knife in his side than this. He hadn't felt so much confusion and doubt for years.

What they meant to one another, what he meant to Hannibal would that all falter over this?

Even in a thousand lifetimes, he'd never find another like Will. That was an inescapable fact. But Will could move about without him. He had done so before.

He moved his hand to Will's forehead finding the exact spot where he had tried to pry this beautiful mind open. Will's scar was a precious reminder of how even through betrayal he wanted a life with Will.

They had that to a degree. But both had returned to repressing their nature. How had that happened when it had been this uphill battle to free themselves of their person Suits eluded him. He loathed self-confinement. Somewhere along the way he'd convinced himself it was for them. But this wasn't what either of them deserved or wanted before their fall.

The war of keeping Will as a companion or a meal weighed in the background as he'd waited for him to return home. Should he choose Malcolm he would grief Will's loss and savor the bitter sweet taste.

To be loved by a monster he had once accepted the darkest parts of himself. They had forged a bond that he was sure would kill them both if separated and now, hands wrapped around Hannibal's throat and Hannibal's fingers against his scar felt like a gut punch. It would've been easier if Hannibal's concerns hadn't popped into his own head.

If he knew Malcolm was getting ready to chase them then he could revel in hating Malcolm just as he did with Jack. But Jack was nothing more than a ghost that he'd been running from. Jack was his excuse for not giving in at every little impulse he had. He'd wanted all Hannibal offered and he couldn't take it without the excuse to keep him in check.

Releasing his chokehold he rested a hand on top of Hannibal's. The yearning for Hannibal was too frightening. Just the thought of being dived was unthinkable. Right now he had no more words to explain these feelings.

Doubt

When Will awoke he found himself on the couch and the apartment silent. His phone remained on the side table where Hannibal had left it the night before, but he didn't feel like calling just yet. His head was still swimming with their conversation. Scrubbing his face he tried to refocus on anything besides last night. The vulnerability Hannibal shone made him squirm. That wasn't how they were. Was that what he wanted though? Was that what he was unconsciously seeking from Malcolm? He'd never been any good at honest self reflection. He'd always needed to empathize with monsters who weren't him. Always looking elsewhere, finding relief in his work. That's what he should be doing, putting the case at the forefront so that it could be solved and he'd move on.

Instead he moved into the empty kitchen. It always bothered him when Hannibal wasn't there. Hannibal had become a fixture of the room. The kitchen had been the man's escape from the cramped cage he placed them in. Without the excuse of Jack on their trail it was shameful how adamantly he kept Hannibal chained here. Hannibal was right he had been patient, far more patient than he would've been if the roles were reversed.

Opening the fridge he found last night's leftover; seared carp nothing fancy like their usual meals. His heart sank at the realization of the meals' meaning.

"What am I going to do?"

The cold air didn't bother Hannibal as he walked. It had been colder sitting at home watching Will sleep restlessly and not know if he wanted or could ease him. Wrapping his head around this renewed emotion, jealousy, was just as difficult as when he'd realized he loved Will.

From the first moment they met he saw potential for something in Will. At first he acted on curiosity pulling Will's string to see what would come of it. It was the moment he'd thought Will had been killed by one of his tests that he realized it wasn't just friendship or curiosity he felt. Through twisted acts he'd attempted intimacy, carving out a spot solely for him and Will in the world. That had been threatened many times by Jack Crawford or the police.

Betrayal, acceptance, forgiveness had all come and gone but perhaps that had been only his perception. He couldn't empathize like Will could. He wasn't wired that way. Everyone else was beneath him, lower than the ants feasting on trash. There were only a handful of people he considered a step up from ant to plaything or pig. Back in Baltimore everyone had been so easy to play with. Right under the FBI's nose he'd been able to operate smoothly, the NYPD were no better.

Flexing his gloved fingers he stared up at the apartment building belonging to the home of Malcolm Bright, the current bane of his existence. *It's frightening what someone could find out in a short time.*

Hannibal smirked at the thought of Bright's fear stricken face as he entered the building just as easily as if he'd lived here. The interior was lacking the opulence he'd expected based on Will's assurance of the man's familial wealth. Apparently even upscaled apartments had a few squeaking steps. The scent of horrendous cologne matching the one he'd smelled on Will last night took him to the fourth floor.

There were noticeably less doors crammed together. Only one held the signs of someone coming and going. For someone who worked homicide, Bright didn't appear to fear break-ins. No extraneous locks or security system could be found. It all felt too easy. Someone so simple wasn't worthy of Will.

The entire decor of the loft made him yawn. The only entrancing thing was the wall of weapons begging for his attention. In the reflection of the glass cases he saw himself smirking. It wasn't everyday that he had such a wild selection to use upon his prey. Already his mind was conducting how to use every one of these blades to form the most intricate display of Bright's corpse. He would paint a love letter to Will in Bright's blood. Or he could frame Bright for the current attacks. Then the case would technically be solved and he would be able to continue to live with Will without distraction.

A muffled cry caught his attention. *Disgusting* he thought seeing the unobscured bed, the lack of walls set off horrible visions of Will splayed before it. *I won't be cast aside for you.*

What he had with Will was irreplaceable; he had made sure of that. He looked to his hand, finding one of the short blades in it. Its weight felt like an old friend as he walked over to the sleeping man. One of his hands was strapped to the headboard, his body thrashing in his sleep. He stilled by the bed's edge watching the display. What he'd give to peer into the nightmare plaguing the man. How wonderful it would be to make such fears a reality.

"Will" Bright squeaked.

What are you to him? He twisted the blade in his hand. A stab in the right place could help stop the fidgeting sleep forever. There would be nothing more beautiful than killing Bright in the name of Will; a show of his devotion. No one but Will would know it was him. The incompetent fools at the NYPD would end up chasing their own tails until they gave up.

"Don't!" Malcolm cried out in his sleep.

Sighing he wondered if killing this way would be enjoyable. He preferred the chase and the game leading up to the kill. He frowned at the lost potential. Before meeting Will, a man like this would be easily disposed of. Just another pig to fill his stomach.

I've been compromised by love. He sneered.

Laying the blade down he moved to the kitchenet. On the small island a concoction of pills and a phone lay freely.

"You should be more careful of what you lay out in the open Mr. Bright."

After images of his nightmare stuck around in shadows as he opened his eyes.

It's not real, he thought, ignoring the human-like figure lingering in his doorway. Shutting his eyes he took a deep breath. Opening them again he was relieved at the shadow's retreat.

Groggily making his way to his pill cocktail he contemplated if he needed to adjust the dosage. Seeing shadow people could not be another one of his 'quirks'. Focusing on the case was tough enough without the added stress.

He wanted to jump into work but somehow it felt like a betrayal to do so without Will present.

He smiled, recalling how peaceful dinner had been with him. It couldn't compare to any dinner he had before. Even the chow mein tasted better while he talked Will's ear off again about his collection. If he'd known someone like Will back when he was in the FBI he could've been completely happy working alongside the other pretentious agents.

It was strange how strongly he missed Will.

He glanced at today's affirmation. "Honesty is the first chapter in the book of wisdom-Thomas Jefferson." He laughed. What did he have to be honest about?

He couldn't mention these new feelings to anyone. Ainsley wouldn't bother with anything unless it led to a newsworthy story, mother would want an interrogation, and his father already had some ideas. Then there were his coworkers. They weren't supposed to know he stole confidential information on the case let alone showed them to someone.

None of that mattered at the moment. The inevitable consequences couldn't dull the excitement of meeting Will again in a few hours.

The dreaded knot in Will's stomach had yet to leave him as he continued to split his attention between the T.V. and the front door. It was hardly a good use of his time. He should solve the case or go out and find Hannibal.

As much as he wanted Hannibal to come home he didn't know what would happen next. The things he felt, the barely hidden emotion emanating from Hannibal, was so new it swirled just under his skin, unable to escape without consequences. What were the consequences? The T.V. had yet to provide him with answers.

An apology was owed. Not an apology for dinner but for inviting these self doubts into their safe haven. For making all of this seem as if it were an afterthought.

Insecurities peaked at the thought of Hannibal retaliating by replacing him. Maybe he would replace him with Malcolm. He could see the latent potential for Malcolm to become a killer. The night terrors, the medication pointing to anxiety and depression, the tremor brought on by some childhood trauma, they all would be catnip to Hannibal. A few strings pulled and Malcolm could be Hannibal's new project.

The knot in his stomach turned into full blown nausea.

He needed to apologize. How did someone apologize to a cannibal killer?

You're still here, Hannibal thought as he entered their home. There he was kneeling at the Television altar. Hannibal wondered what prayers Will had spoken to it this morning. Had Will prayed for Jack to find them? Had he begged for Bright to be spared from his wrath?

Remaining silent, Will stared at him, his worship neglected now that he realized he'd returned.

What are you thinking he thought as he hung his coat before bringing in the groceries to the kitchen. *What is your next move?* he questioned, slowly unbagging his purchases.

He loathed caring about where they stood. It would be so much easier to consume Will. Every portion of him would sustain him for as long as necessary. Bright wouldn't have him then

Opening the refrigerator he found last night's meal gone. It was good that Will hadn't started on the self-destructive habit of starving himself.

The murmur from the television silenced. The crinkle of the plastic around the fresh vegetables and light thuds of tonight's meat placed in the refrigerator filled in the void of sound.

They had made their home in silence. Moments passed with him reading or cooking while Will looked out for men in black vans or scanning for crimes in newspapers. Silence was as staple as breathing. Each of them held the tool to cut it.

He should say something. He'd gone as far as to enter the kitchen but words were trapped. Nothing short of being stabbed would free the words. Being stabbed might hurt less than this.

Instinctually he began to place the dry foods into the pantry adjusting the pasta box so that all face the same way. He wondered if Hannibal missed his previous luxury life. Moving here he made Hannibal cut back on his regal ways. It would've been too big of a giveaway for Jack.

Jack's not chasing us anymore. He hasn't for years, he reminded himself.

If Hannibal took Malcolm as a replacement he'd have all the means to be as refined as he wanted. He might be able to start practicing therapy for New York's elite.

Unless he's already killed Malcolm he thought, closing the pantry.

Was it time to pack their bags? Did Hannibal want him to join him this time?

Those sharp eyes told him little. After such uncharacteristic vulnerability, it was reasonable that Hannibal would shut up his emotions once more. He wished he had that option. Standing here he felt so raw. It infuriated him being so exposed.

"You'll be late for your meeting," Hannibal said, closing the fridge.

"I,"

Hannibal leaned against the sink's edge, offering him a fraction of attention.

"I don't have to go."

"You have no means of contacting him."

It was unlike Hannibal to not kill Malcolm or send him away like this. This could've been a cruel setup. It wouldn't be the first time Hannibal had framed him for murder. Perhaps that was his consequence. For how long would he be locked up this time? A month? A year? More?

Strutting over Hannibal took his face into his hands. Contemplating eyes stared into his. If he offered a piece of himself would he be forgiven?

Something pressed into his hand but it didn't feel sharp. It was round.

"You shouldn't make a habit of keeping people waiting."

In the moment he looked down to see a bottle of anxiety medication in his hands and back up Hannibal was gone.

Malcolm felt positively manic. Nothing was going to stop him.

Definitely need to adjust the medication.

He couldn't wait to see Will. Only barely was he holding back from running to their meet-up. Glancing at the time on his phone he made a mental note that he would still be early. Obnoxiously early.

Time was always horrible, it never sped up or slowed when you needed it to do so.

Setting his head right he tapped the file in hand. This was about work. The case had to be his focus. It was his focus.

“Woah” Dani exclaimed as he nearly ran into her. “Where have you been?”

“The usual places.”

She crossed her arms. “No new theories?”

“Not yet.”

“Why are you smiling?”

“I’m smiling?” *Definitely need to fix the dosage.* “I’m just in a good mood. We are close to cracking the case.”

Everything about her face screamed that she didn’t believe him. “Malcolm,”

“I have to be somewhere right now but I’ll fill you in later,” he said running off.

Running felt good; he should've been running his whole life instead of catching rides. Cars were too slow.

Bzzz bzzz bzzz

Screeching to a halt he pulled out his phone.

“Mother” he frowned. If anything could snap him out of a manic episode it was receiving a call from his mother. Ignoring the call he decided to walk the rest of the way.

New York somehow had to be smaller than he was led to believe. When he’d agreed to today’s meeting he hadn’t realized the address belonged to the exact cupcake shop where he’d saved that teen. Hannibal would’ve been enraged to return here. It was his fault for denying Hannibal the freedom to kill. Things could’ve ended there. Yesterday wouldn’t have happened.

Mistakes cost lives. Coming here again might be a mistake that cost him his life.

Five minutes until our meeting he thought.

In five minutes he would know the next step. Whether to run or not depended on these crucial minutes.

Four minutes ...

Three...

Two...

One.

He held his breath as the time turned to one o'clock. Air was not allowed to fill his lungs as it turned to one o-five. He should be running but there hadn't been any signs of police on their way to him.

Be still.

1:10

"Will!" the voice broke through ushering air into his lungs once more. Running towards him was a very much alive Malcolm Bright. "You're early!" he said, smiling like an idiot.

"Is everything alright?" he asked at Will's confused expression.

Laughter pooled from Will, a jovial if not relief-filled laughter. "Yes, it's just good to see you."

The comment filled him with overwhelming joy. It was either that or just a tail end spike in his mania today. The downside was going to be unpleasant he knew it but for now he enjoyed feeling something resembling happiness.

Maybe that's what this is he thought as he ordered. *Maybe I'm not manic, maybe I'm just happy to be here with Will.*

"Y-you," a teen with several piercings stuttered, nearly dropping their order. "You,"

His stomach dipped, did this person know who his father was? This was hardly the place he wanted to reveal that he was in any way related to The Surgeon.

"You," the teen repeated as he placed down their order to reach over the small counter and grab ahold of Will's hands. "You saved my life that day" he nearly cried.

"It was nothing," Will said, doing a horrible job of hiding his discomfort.

"You saved me."

"You really don't have to make a big deal out of it" Will said, taking the muffin from the counter.

Disappointed, the teen turned back to their work.

Picking up his own muffin he caught up with Will who stopped just outside the door.

"You're a regular hero."

Will began methodically picking the nuts off his muffin. "It wasn't exactly like that."

"They were practically jumping to get your autograph."

Shaking his head, Will scoffed. "They would not want that. I just happened to be in the area at the time."

Malcolm couldn't tell if he was just being modest or was trying to hide something. That was something he was increasingly noticing that when it came to Will, he couldn't be exactly sure what he was thinking. Knowing that should've uneased him more than it did. But who was he to go prodding into this man's life? Everyone held some sort of secret. Whatever secret Will held couldn't be bigger than his own.

"I wouldn't mind hearing more about your heroics," he said softly.

He enjoyed being in Will's company and didn't want it to end so suddenly because of the teen's misguided gratitude.

Will's sigh felt heavy, as though it had been held in for years. Was he the first person to have tried to get this man to open up about this? He could easily see that Will wasn't a part of the boy's club in the FBI in the same way that he wasn't. There weren't many places for people like them. And even fewer chances to talk about the things in their head with honesty.

"After a while, it's hard to tell if you actually do save people. Half the time it's endless running, chasing after someone before time ends."

"I understand." He did. Most days it did feel like a run against the time. Lives looming overhead and whether you made it or not the process would repeat. Case after case you'd be running until you couldn't anymore. You feel for every victim until you can't. Adrenaline and anxiety pooling inside until you think you can't feel anything beyond that.

"I wasn't much of a hero before and I am definitely not one now."

They stood in silence for a long moment. It was something that he felt the both of them needed to do. Maybe he'd been avoiding this self reflection his whole life. Truth was he fought so hard to save lives in order to make up for the lives his father had taken. Did that make him good or selfish for his actions? His eyes traced the scar of Will's hands then the spot where he knew his forehead scar was. A painful life mapped out. He'd been lucky that he had the ability to hide most of his painfilled history from prying eyes.

"Sorry," Will said, seemingly coming out of thought too.

"Imposter syndrome is a real pain," he offered.

"Yeah," Will smiled. He really liked his smile. There was such a gentleness and shyness in it that made him want to smile too. "I'm sure you've done more good than you realize."

"I think you might have me beat there."

His heart fluttered at the comment. It really wasn't every day that someone told him that he was doing good. More often than not people questioned why he did the things he did at all. His otherness constantly seeped through the well put together appearance his mother had

tailored for him. How many people could take a look at him and see someone attempting to do good?

Too late he noticed that he had closed the minuscule gap between them. Far too late he realized that a want that had wormed its way into his head was being put into action. It was in all sense of the word too late to stop himself from pressing his lips against Will's.

Lips softer than he'd imagined but strong held against his impulsive action. Jerking himself back he covered his mouth as though the barrier would be enough to stop him from repeating the action.

What did I just do?

Malcolm's eyes were as wide as if he'd pulled a knife on him. He didn't know what to do. His brain barely registered the light touch against him. A kiss. He'd been kissed. Kissed by someone who wasn't Hannibal.

What was he to do now? What would Hannibal do? There wasn't a way he could hide this from him forever. They were lucky that Hannibal hadn't tailed them today or else...

Will could already see himself covered in plastic assisting in discarding whatever parts Hannibal couldn't use for their dinner. Hannibal would purposefully mutilate a certain part of Malcolm. What was he going to tell Hannibal? They were already barely speaking.

Fear frozen in Malcolm's blue eyes stared at him.

"I'm sorry. It was impulsive."

If he were Hannibal at this moment he'd use this to his advantage. He knew how to play this game. He could lead Malcolm on with this proof of interest. But what was supposed to be the end game if he did so? Could he even stomach doing this to Malcolm? Already the man had a target on his back. No he couldn't do that to him. He'd never forgive himself for doing that again.

"Hey," he flashed a gentle smile. "It's alright."

"I better go," Malcolm said hand still blocking his mouth.

"There's nothing to feel ashamed about. Nothing at all."

Weakly nodding, Malcolm lowered his now trembling hand. "I ... I really should go."

The second Will walked through the door he knew something had occurred. The way he lumbered about as though half dead reminded him of the night he had shown up at his home

beside himself about kissing Alana Bloom. And all too easily he recalled the itching frustration that he'd felt hearing those words.

In quick stride, he took hold of Will, who just blinked at him in confusion. It was a fair assumption that Will had been so lost in thought that he hadn't realized he made it back to him. There was something about knowing that Will could subconsciously return that helped keep his composure. He was Will's safe haven, the most important person in his life now and forever.

"It was fine," Will said, snapping back to reality.

"Must've been worthwhile." He smirked

"I did manage to confirm that Malcolm Bright is still alive," Will said, taking off his glasses to rub his eyes. Hannibal preferred Will without them; they were just another layer Will used to distance himself from his surroundings. Although he did appreciate the show of a barrier between Will and Bright. No one else deserved to be looked at by Will straight on.

Slipping the glasses from Will he neatly folded them and pocketed it. Will rubbed his temple a bit harshly.

"What do you think I will do when you tell me what it is you're holding back?" he asked.

"Let me think about that, maybe eat him!" Will sassed.

Of all the people in the world he had to grow close to this rude being. Anyone else who'd spoken to him this way had met their end. Will was the exception to every one of his self-maintained rules.

"Do I need to make such preparations?" he teased, cupping Will's face with one hand.

A deep sigh escaped Will, his hot breath running down the side of his arm. Several thoughts ran through his head but he remained still, waiting for what Will would say. That's how they've worked since the fall, him waiting then reacting to Will.

Emotionally compromised.

"You were right."

"You will have to be a bit more specific."

"He was interested or maybe he thought he was? I don't know his train of thought on this matter." He ran a hand over his face. "He kissed me."

It took every ounce of restraint not to harden his touch or to prepare to skewer Malcolm Bright. He'd known this was a possibility and had even mentally prepared for it but hearing it as a reality was much different.

Will gawked at him. "You're not running off?"

“Is that what you want me to do? Do you want me to take care of it?”

“No. At least not like that.” Will sighed leaning into his touch. “We can’t do anything to get the police’s attention.”

“And parading around with Malcolm Bright isn’t doing just that?”

“I have it under control.”

“And this kiss, was that in your control as well?”

As though a switch had been flipped within him, Will pressed him into the wall with all his strength.

“I abhor your jealousy.” Will’s finger twisted into his collar. “The whole way home I thought about what to do about it.”

“And what was your decision?”

In a fierce grip Will took hold of his face. Lips desperately clung to his as though they were water to fill thirst. What that kiss ignited in Will scorched him, maring his skin with grips so tight it felt like a fight not to lose him. He smirked into the next crushing kiss.

I could never leave you as you can never leave me he thought, biting onto Will’s bottom lip.

Take-out

A possessive arm draped over him as the piercing morning light reflected off the T.V. into his eyes. His head felt hazy but he knew the events that had led him to this position. Simultaneously he wanted to laugh and return to blissful sleep. This wasn't going to last. Hannibal was not a cuddler and he wouldn't delude himself to think today would be the day that changed.

Slipping from Hannibal's grip was easier in his head than in reality. Yet somehow he managed it.

Pulling the blinds firmly closed he didn't dare look back at Hannibal. Already he could feel those eyes on him mapping out his exposed flesh. He wasn't ready for the discussion or the teasing about last night. Although it had been an act of desire it hadn't been impulsive. It was more attuned to a ticking time bomb that now reset. An inevitable event.

Out of Hannibal's embrace he felt cold but he couldn't go back to those arms, not yet. Internally he had to wrestle with what his next move would be. Hannibal was right that he wasn't the same naive man he'd been before. Up until now, he'd just been fooling himself that a piece of that man was still within him.

Draped in minimal shadow, Will stood before him as a modern Michelangelo sculpture. Strong arms capable of pinning him, legs taut with tension to run but pliable when necessary.

Sex had always been nothing more than a means of coercion for those he had fallen into bed with. As with many other things when it came to Will, that differed. When he held Will in his arms last night he understood a connection that had been so elusive for who knew how long. Sentimentality of the moment would not be exchanged at this time. Will was in contemplation.

Rising from the uncomfortable ground he noted to be more adamant about making it upstairs the next time the mood of intimacy hit. Clothing strewn along the floor ignored, he settled right behind Will.

Will must've anticipated his move as he moved to inhale the scent of their coupling Will leaned to expose his neck further to him. In broad strokes he ran his tongue along Will's carotid artery. To feed his carnal hunger with Will for the rest of the day would be a drastic improvement of the way he'd spent most days in this place. What to do about Malcolm Bright still loomed overhead. Will couldn't walk away from the case and he couldn't let Bright go for setting doubts in Wil's head.

This had to stop. *Fuck* Will thought, feeling the stirrings from Hannibal's actions. They couldn't do this. He wanted the whisper of breath against his neck to never stop. His body

wanted to make up for lost time he'd fought this specific pull. It was as if he knew the act would further cement them as one.

I'm just romanticizing events he thought, stepping away. It was an emotional outlet, a desperate move to keep Hannibal besides him. That's what Hannibal probably viewed it.

"I need to get ready," he said, despite the ache of moving away.

"Of course," Hannibal didn't deter him or block his retreat.

The reflection in the bathroom mirror was hardly familiar. All along his body were marks aside from his scars. On his shoulder there was an imprint of teeth so perfect that it could've been confused for a tattoo. Along the scar of his abdomen was a string of small hickeys. Larger ones were placed on both ankles and knees. Even his face wasn't spared from being marked as his blood peppered his bottom lip from a small cut that stung as he licked it clean.

This mirrored image entranced him. Other lovers, a whopping total of two, had never left him with such marks. Proof of their acts had never been permitted as if they wanted plausible deniability from ever participating. The marks Hannibal left could not be ignored.

"You should not waste what little hot water we have," Hannibal said stepping into view of the fogging mirror. Actually looking at him he noticed that Hannibal had not been spared from being marked. In fact, he looked worse with bruises and red blotches all over his chest and arms.

"Will?"

"Right." Quickly he turned the water from boiling to freezing.

"It will do you no good to resist what you desire."

"Clearly I didn't resist at all last night."

Hannibal smirked. "I'm sure there are places you have yet to reach."

Stepping out from the shower he averted assessing Hannibal any further. "You can shower now."

Hannibal's hand gripped his bare arm as he began to slip.

"Physical intimacy is a staple in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs."

How could he not laugh at that? "I don't need justification for what we did."

"Perhaps not," he said, seeing neither fear nor shame on Will's face. For too long they've circled this moment tiptoeing a line that needed to be crossed. Yes, Will didn't need justification he required reassurance.

Picking up his razor he placed it into Will's hand.

It was a tedious exercise in maintaining his pristine look shaving every morning. Often he caught Will watching him move the antique barber's blade against his face. It required skill and dexterity to not snip the skin beyond repair.

"Will you do me the honors?" he asked.

"You're joking."

"Those who we choose in our lives shape us. Mold me as you see fit."

"Aren't you worried that I'll leave you grotesque and misshapen?"

"Dear Will, anything done by your hands is art."

Will scoffed but there were nerves mixed into the dismissive sound.

At times it was hard to tell what Will believed about him. Did he still harbor resentment for the past? Did he seek more than he had offered? He was more than willing to fix that. He had done so much to shape their own world. For Will, he would fight, kill, or lay down his weapons at his request. Yet he knew Malcolm Bright could provide normalcy that he couldn't; a world covered in a nostalgic light. But Will no longer held claim to such a normal life.

He took a seat along the tub's edge; it was undignified and offered little stability from the collected water droplets. Light glistened off the blade in Will's hand. Will's thumb caressed the handle. Doubts absolved Will stepped forward.

"I need you to promise me," Will sighed. With utmost seriousness he continued. "Promise me that you won't kill Malcolm."

"He remains unharmed at your request. And I have not freely hunted. How much more proof would you require of me?"

Those were the best words he had. They didn't dance around flowery words, no I love yous, that would make it seem fake. The way they were joined was not sweet; it was forged through blood and pain, betrayal and trust. Any tenderness he showed had to be measured into small doses. Favor heated kisses urges boil over to a point had always felt easier than tender touches and chaste kisses but he knew Will craved the latter from time to time.

Lightly he touched Will's hand. "What proof do you require?"

"Maybe I should ask a part of you as a dish."

"That could be arranged."

"Just when I think we couldn't be stranger you remind me of how abnormal we really are."

"You're welcome."

“Tell me, my boy, what's with that face?” his father asked.

“I always look like this,” Malcolm snapped.

“No,” His father leaned forward. “Not exactly this, there's something on your mind.”

“There's always something on my mind, part of the job.”

“This is not job related” he wagged his finger as if to scold him for lying.

“If this was about work well,” he reclined in his chair. “You wouldn't be so completely away from this place. Not that I can't blame you. No offense Mr. David. They did try to make it more homely.”

Malcolm tried to keep his head together.

Why did he even think to come here in the first place? Why was this the place he always ran to when he messed things up? He didn't really want to think about Will. He'd said it was fine but it wasn't. How could kissing him be fine? It was a...It kept him up in an entirely different way than his usual night terrors. He shouldn't think about that. Not here.

“My boy it's not good to keep secrets.”

He narrowed his eyes at his hypocrite father. His whole childhood had been built upon his father's secrets.

“Fine,” he turned to his journals.”I'm always here for you.”

Malcolm knew not to give in but the need to tell someone even if it was his serial killer father.

“I,” His voice quivered. The vulnerability annoyed him.

If he didn't deal with this then how was he supposed to focus on work? The killer still hadn't been caught. Lives depended on his focus.

“Yes?” his father questioned facing him once more.

He preferred if he didn't; it made him feel like a child under that look. This look was manufactured; he had to remind himself of what his father was.

His opinion doesn't matter. Telling him wouldn't matter, not even if he said a word to mother. She wouldn't believe him.

“Okay,” He started to pace but quickly stopped himself from running through the soles of his good shoes. “Well, the other day was not a date. Completely not a date but then...” He

messed with his hair. "I mean, damn it. I swear I didn't plan-" He took a deep breath. "I kissed a man," he said it so softly but of course his father had heard.

That plastered smile morphed into genuine surprise. "Well, that's not what I was expecting." He rubbed a hand over his beard. "And?" he questioned. Genuine interest.

"And," he repeated, keeping his tone neutral.

"You wouldn't have said anything if it didn't mean something."

He didn't know if it *did* mean anything. He shook his head.

"I can't believe you would," he laughed, catching Malcolm off guard. "You think a father would know well... Congrats I suppose." This father beamed as if he told him he'd just won the lottery.

"No." Malcolm balled up his fist.

"It bothers you?" His father blinked in confusion. "Why? Homosexuality is perfectly normal in several species. You know I knew a -"

He didn't want to feel this relief. His father's acceptance shouldn't mean anything to him. But what was he hoping for if not this? Another reason to see the worst in him. If he lashed out or said something cruel it would help turn his back on his father for good. Yet here his father was recounting one of his college stories with a smile on his face.

Acceptance by a serial killer; a laughable situation all around.

"I don't even know if it meant anything."

"Of course if it did. You told me. If you told your mother she'd be arranging dates and your sister would report on it." His father smirked. "Or that was your reasoning wasn't it?"

"I don't know if-" This was frustrating. *This was a mistake.*

"You must know-"

"-No I don't!" he yelled. "All my life I've been so consumed with figuring out who *you* are that I didn't have time to find out who *I* am."

"Then perhaps you should find out, my boy."

Frustrated, he knocked on the door signaling Mr. David to let him out.

"For the record, you'll always be my boy. I'd love you no matter what."

Daring not to look back he left the room.

He really hadn't given thought to the sort of person he was. It had always been easier to go along with the assumptions people had. Most only saw him as The Surgeon's son. That's why he had changed his name, why he had tried so hard for the FBI, why he forced separation from his father until he couldn't anymore. What was he now? Did one action drastically change him?

No, he thought. Who he was or what he was didn't matter right now. There was a killer out there who still hadn't been caught. His personal life needed to be pushed far to the back burner for now.

"Mr. Bright must be disappointed to not be in your presence today" Hannibal hummed.

"I could do without his help."

"I doubt he was of any help to you."

Will smirked. "I wouldn't be so sure." In a swift motion, he pulled out several folded papers out of his jacket pocket and tossed them onto the coffee table.

"Autopsy reports?" He smiled as the memory of Will pouring over similar ones back in Baltimore floated to the front of his mind.

"And why would you have such a thing in your possession?"

"Because," Will slipped the paper from his hand. "Malcolm hadn't realized that a trophy had been taken from both victims."

"Their hearts" he recalled the victim splattered on the floor.

"The victims were both placed in highly trafficked areas. I thought it was a warning but there is limited connection to the others."

"In addition, he has yet to return to kill the teen from the shop. I for one wouldn't want any loose ends." Anticipation to squeeze the life out of this killer crawled upward.

"I need to understand this killer but I can't do it staring at pieces of paperwork."

"What do you have in mind?"

"I was thinking we have take-out for dinner."

"Damn it" Malcolm muttered to himself as he swiped to reject yet another call from his mother. "Where are those autopsy reports?" Again he silenced his phone.

Bzzzz Bzzz Bzzz

"I really don't have time for this."

“You should never hide anything from your mother,” she said, waltzing in the front door.

Why do I always forget that she has a key? Why do I let her have a key?

Her eyebrow rose at the papers splayed over his coffee table and floor. “These are,” he said, trying to think of a lie as he pushed them into a pile.

“Gil would have your head for taking those I’m sure.”

“Well it’s a good thing he’s your close friend.”

“Can we table this conversation? You said you would come to the Gala.”

“That’s in a week.”

“Exactly. I need to make sure that you have a suit ready and you should brush up on your manners...”

“I can’t leave right now.”

“I’m sure that you can if you are sneaking around trying to solve mysteries on your own.” Frowning, she bent down to pull a photo stuck to the bottom of her shoe. Her face grew pale as she looked at it and quickly tossed it onto the table.

“Let’s go, Malcolm.”

“Wait, did you know her?”

“What?” she asked, her voice rising indicating that she was lying.

“Mother.”

“It’s not as though I’m on a name basis with her.” Her high heels clicked against the floor as she went into the kitchenette. She moved about the space inspecting his pitiful half-empty fridge then the cabinets overhead.

“Mother?” he asked sternly.

“You could say we met in passing,” she said mostly to his disorganized dishes.

“This could help the case.”

“Hardly.” Dismissively she waved. “She catered events.”

Rummaging through his files he found the victim’s job history. “It doesn’t say anything about catering.”

“Of course it doesn’t. She, well, let’s just say she worked under the table for certain reasons.”

“Meaning what exactly.”

“It’s mostly gossip.” She waved off the thought completely. “Let’s go shopping. I’ll get you any suit you want for the Gala.”

“This could be a break in the case. What caterer company did she work for?”

“I can’t recall.”

“Mother?”

“Why don’t you go ask your father? His calls you actually answer.”

“Mother,” he sighed. “Fine, I will go get a new suit.”

Even with the adjustments to its length the sledgehammer weighed him down as they walked down the street. Leave it to Hannibal to have what he needed to duplicate the murder weapon. After tonight he would have to dispose of it. Adjusting his messenger bag to his other shoulder he scanned the thinning crowd. This is how the killer had operated; stalking the next target, feeling the growing weight of his tool by his side. Here was the midpoint of all three cases. This is where the killer would have struck.

“Who would be the target?” Hannibal’s whispered, careful to remain in his shadow.

“The first victim was a woman, the second we saved a teen and the one we didn’t was a man. He’d need to find the teen’s replacement. Diversity points. This killer doesn’t want to be discovered until the final curtain call. These are still rehearsals.”

“That one with the blue hat.” Hannibal pinpointed a young man no older than twenty. “If our killer is eating hearts that one would do.”

Taking a breath he pushed away the nagging thoughts in his head. This wasn’t his kill, this was a kill of a man that needed to be caught.

It’s almost sad how little people pay attention to their surroundings he thought as the blaring music from their headphones reached him. Behind them he knew Hannibal was following.

The true killer didn’t have such assistance but he needed Hannibal’s skills to make this work. They both had studied the autopsy. This needed to be as close to the actual killer as possible. Reaching out he pulled a headphone from the teen.

“Make the next turn” he whispered as his knife threatened to pierce his back. “Don’t make a sound.”

Leading the frazzled teen into the alley he could feel the sledgehammer call for his attention.

This needs to be quick. Quicker than the last. The next one needs no hesitation.

Gloved fingers curled around the handle. Weight easing as he choked up on the handle he swung aiming for the temporal lobe. Crumbling like a house of cards the teen kneeled over. A few seconds of bloodied gurgles sent Hannibal forward. There could be no risk. With a loud snap the sound stopped. Laying motionless the victim stared at him.

They had to hurry. Abandoning the sledgehammer he pulled at the prey's shirt keeping it taut as Hannibal set to split the skin down their chest. As though having an out-of-body experience he watched every move.

No. Not like this, he thought *Too slow.*

Snagging the knife from Hannibal he cut the surrounding tissue and plunged his hand into the open chest.

"This is my design" Will whispered, staring at the heart within his hand.

Such beauty couldn't be admired for very long. Snatching the heart from Will he wrapped it up and placed it into a cooing mixture he'd prepared beforehand.

"What of the body?" he asked, tearing his eyes away from the other wasted organs. It was a pity that he couldn't take as much as he wanted or morph the corpse into a display of his own.

"I'll take care of it. He needs to be seen but you can not."

"Be sure your friend doesn't see you," he said, cupping Will's face. "I would hate to have to break you out so soon."

Provoking pink tongue swiped at Will's bottom lip. He would not take such bait until they were home once more.

Securing his prize he reentered the crowd.

"I have a special place for you in mind" he muttered to the weapon.

How long does a suit fitting take? Malcolm thought as he was thrust into yet another jacket. He'd been placating mother for hours moving in and out of jackets and pants as if he were nothing more than a living doll. If he had it his way he would wear the perfectly good black suit in his closet.

She might know something he reminded himself. Truthfully he didn't know why he hadn't thought of going to his mother for more cases. She *did* know half of New York.

"Jaque, don't you think this one is too boxy? We can't have that."

"Of course Madam." Jaque pulled off his jacket yet again.

That's why. Everything came with a price.

“Jessica!” a greying harried woman exclaimed, her arms wide out in an expected hug. Instantly she pulled his mother into an obligatory cheek kiss.

“Oh, Agnes” his mother’s voice jumped to an uncomfortable octave.

“What are you doing here?”

Silently he begged to anyone who would answer his plea to prevent his mother from getting caught up in a lengthy discussion. *I would prefer to leave here some time this year.*

“Just doing a little shopping before the Gala. You know how it goes.” She flashed a controlled smile. “You know my son Malcolm.”

Agnes’s face hardened. “Oh yes.”

He racked his head for what he'd probably done to her in the past. A spilled drink or maybe she was the one whose cat ate one of his anxiety medications that had dropped on the floor. That had been some party. Or was this the woman he'd called an old crow with an obscene need to collect porcelain dolls because she couldn't deal with the fact that her daughter didn't want to have children and her son was gay.

He shuddered to think what his mother would do to fill the disappointing void if she found out that he was gay. Not that he was. That’s just what she’d expect if she found out about him kissing Will. She couldn’t know about that not ever. It was one kiss. It meant nothing. So why did it hurt so much to reject that moment?

“It's very nice to see you again” he greeted.

“You will be in attendance at the Gala?”

“I'm afraid so.”

Mother shot him a look saying ‘if you don't want to spend eternity here wise up.’

“I hope to see you there as well.”

Agnes’s face puckered as though smelling something awful.

“What do you think of blue for him, Agnes?” his mother asked, clearly trying to rescue the moment.

“Blue was Martin's color wasn’t it?”

“Oh.” His mother’s wide eyes looked to him then to Jaque. “Perhaps black then.”

“A color can’t belong to anyone,” he said firmly. “I think blue is just fine.”

Agnes huffed.

“Mind your tone Malcolm” mother said through clenched teeth.

Why is it when around others she treats me even more like a misbehaving child?

“It’s not your fault Jessica. The young never have respect for their elders.”

Before he could tell Ms. Agnes extensively what he thought of her, his phone buzzed.

“Yes!” he exclaimed, pulling off his jacket. “I need to go.” He pointed to his phone. “Murder is calling.”

Agnes blanched.

“I have to solve a murder” he corrected. “Good evening Agnes.”

“I’ll be there as soon as possible. Text me the address” he said as soon as he answered the phone.

“We have a problem.”

“What is it?” he asked, slipping into the cab.

“Just get here.”

Everything was so oddly normal when Will returned to their apartment. Seemingly innocent Hannibal sat on the couch sketchbook in hand.

“How was your evening?”

“A real piece of work” he laughed.

Laying the sketchbook aside, Hannibal waited expectantly. Hanging up his jacket he sat on the coffee table.

“What of our cannibal friend?”

“That’s not what he’s doing with the hearts. I realized it wasn’t about consumption for him.”

“Then what is he doing?” Hannibal asked, the toe of his shoe hitching up his pant leg.

“Weighing them. Ancient Egyptians believed that hearts recorded all good and bad in a person.”

“So our killer views themselves as a judge. It’s a shame that we have not been acquaintances.”

His hand snaked over Hannibal’s knee. “You would’ve been the Ammit to his Anubis.”

“ *We* would,” Hannibal corrected.

“Yes,” He leaned closer. “ *We* ,” he whispered, capturing his lips.

Dinner and Diatribes

For the first time in a long time, he didn't find Will upon the altar of his television. There was an air of calmness around Will, the sort only evident when Will understood the trajectory of a case. This meant it was close to the end. There was no need for Will to feel an ounce of worry now.

If things slipped he had their backup plan in motion. He wouldn't reveal the fact he had placed some of Mr. Bright's hair on the body and strategically placed their weapon in his apartment. The lack of cleanliness under Bright's bed was advantageous. Will didn't need to know such things yet.

"I have been contemplating inviting Mr. Bright over for dinner."

"This again?" Will asked not bothering to look up from his book.

"I believe last night was worthy of such celebration."

"You can't resist the need to rub it in right under his nose can you?"

He smirked. "All you would have to do is bring him."

"And how would I introduce you? I doubt you could stomach me pretending to be such a magnificent cook. What alias would you use?"

"Considering you have foregone an alias I see no reason why I would require one."

"Will is a very common name. I can't say the same for yours."

"We often overlook what is right in front of us."

Rolling his eyes, Will flipped his page. "So you're my... what, roommate?"

"I have given it much thought."

"And your decision?"

"I am to be your husband."

The book in Will's hands nearly reached the ceiling as he jumped.

It was not at all the reaction he had in mind.

The air was thick with tension as Malcolm approached the scene.

Flashing blue and red lights kept time with his every step. The whole block was sealed off with police barricades but he knew those who lived or worked in the surrounding buildings were looking on at the blood acting as a trail to the body.

The victim sat calmly as though waiting for their bus to appear but as he stepped closer he could see the fear frozen on their face. He reached forward to inspect the temple but a hand stopped him

“You might've been right on this one,” Gil said, looking everywhere except for the victim.

I should've been able to stop this, he thought. “Where's Dani and JT?”

“I told you we had a problem.” Gil’s hand bunched at his side. “This wasn’t the only body we found tonight.”

The pit in his stomach didn't ease, not when he saw the second body in a similar position and not when he was sat once again in the meeting room with the useless bulletin board.

Two bodies. It could be a show of power or a taunt. But that doesn't make sense.

Practically ripping the hair from his head he pinned the photos of the two new victims to the board.

What was the connection? Two bodies wasn't an opportunity kill. The victims were staged a few feet apart. Both teens but differed in everything else.

He wanted to scream.

Barely he held back from throwing his fist into the board. *How could I have screwed up so much?*

He eyed his phone. He needed insight, he needed answers. Could his father give him that? More than ever he wished he had Will’s number. No, that would be worse.

I should've been focusing more on this case than him.

What was the point of taking files if it didn’t help him get closer to catching this guy? He still didn't even have a suspect; no name, nothing. Not even a motive.

“So it's really a serial killer,” JT said entering the room with a tough face.

“I’m positive about it now.”

“Well, who is he?”

Sometimes he hated JT for bouncing between thinking his profiling skills were a reckless waste of time and the only tool they had.

“We're looking for a male mid-twenties or early thirties. Strong enough to lift a sledgehammer.”

“A sledgehammer? There was none at the scene.”

“He’s using a modified one.” Irritated, he scratched his head. Why did he have to rehash the little he knew about this case to JT? “Where’s Dani?” Dani would be a better person to bounce his thoughts off. She at least wouldn’t ask stupid questions.

“With Edrisa.” JT crossed his arms.

There was something off about JT. He always acted guarded and standoffish towards this but this was different somehow.

“How do you know what the weapon is?”

“Because he’s been working the case on his own again,” Gil said with his utmost disappointed face directed at him. “You stole medical records of the victims?”

There was no sense in lying. “I did. Not that it helped.”

“Do you realize how much trouble you can get into for doing that? Come on Bright!”

He ran his hand through his hair again. “It’s not the time. Dorean, Vasquez, Smith, Brown” he tapped on the victims images. “That’s what we should be focused on. The new victims didn’t share anything with the others. It appears random but it’s not. I have to find the pattern.”

“What you did is serious!” Gil slammed his hand onto the table.

“Slap me with a fine. Lock me up. I don’t care, just do it after I figure this out!” he snapped back.

“Be careful of what you wish for” Dani said sternly blocking the door. “Edrisa tested the hair sample we found on victim number two.”

“Any hits?” Gil asked.

“Unfortunately, yes.” She held up a piece of paper. In a fraction of a second the room temperature dropped. “The hair found in the vics mouth belonged to Malcolm.”

Acting on instinct JT tackled him to the ground. Arms pinned behind. JT growled in his ear “I knew you were off” as Gil yelled “Stop this!” over them.

“There must be a mistake” Gil offered but they all knew Edrisa would have run the tests thrice.

He knew better than to fight JT’s grip or accusation. His mother’s lawyer would have a field day with this.

“Enough JT!” Gil peeled him off.

Like a steaming bull JT let out a deep exhale as he moved to guard the door besides Dani. Dani looked on, clearly not sure where to stand at the moment. He didn’t blame her

cautiousness.

"I will get to the bottom of this until then you're off this case and don't leave the city."

"Gil-"

"-This is the best I can do unless you want to be kept in a holding cell and waste everyone's time going through procedures."

"Okay."

Gil gripped his upper arm. "I mean it. If I see you-"

"-I understand."

"He can't just let him go," JT barked. "He stole records, his DNA was found in the victim's mouth! What more do you need?"

"I said we will figure that out" Gil shot back.

"He's The Surgeon's son! The Surgeon! And we've been letting him parade around every crime scene as if he's not messed up in the head."

A lump forged in his throat so slid he was sure he would choke to death. The silence was deafening. Both JT and Dani probably were wondering about every oddity he displayed, questioning how they could miss such red flags. He had to leave.

"Let him pass Gil," he said in a harsh whisper.

Pushing his way out the station he swore he'd find whoever was mocking him.

He's mocking me, Will thought as he continued to wrap his head around Hannibal's proposal. A ridiculous proposal. He didn't need to go that far.

Pulling the scarf firmly around his neck made the walk a little more bearable. Strangely he didn't feel paranoid or even concerned about returning to Malcolm's apartment.

"Stop calling me!" He caught the tail end of Malcolm's conversation as he turned the corner. "Will?"

Aggravated would put it lightly the way Malcolm looked. His hair had been thoroughly run-through, his eyes held back a sea of tears, and if the grip on his phone were tighter it might've snapped in half.

"Hello?" the man on the other side of the phone asked.

Stabbing his finger against the screen to end the call Malcolm looked back to him.

"Hard day?" he asked gently.

It would be perhaps one midstep that sent Malcolm into a rage. *Was it because of the latest victim?* If roles were reversed he would be just as upset not stopping this latest victim. But Malcolm was closer to livid. They both knew it was a matter of time until another body dropped he was upping the timeline.

“You have no idea” Malcolm jabbed his keys at the lock.

“Let me,” he said, smoothly unlocking the door.

“Why are you here?”

“Do you no longer want my help?”

The knife in his inner jacket pocket began to call to him. “Just say the word and I'm gone.” Smiling, he returned the keys.

“No.” Malcolm sighed. “Sorry it just has been the worst day in my life.”

“I doubt that.”

Malcolm seemed to think before nodding. “You’re right.”

Letting Will into his loft he held back his frustration. How was he supposed to face JT and Dani again now that they knew who his father was? He hadn't thought that would be a problem yet. At least not before they found out he was working with Will on this case. He shouldn't be letting Will back here. Will shouldn't have helped him in the first place.

Who was Will? He hardly knew him to begin with.

“Where were you last night?”

“Were we supposed to meet?” Will asked, pulling off his scarf. He studied Will's movement calm and relaxed, his face held a look of confusion and apologetic. “I got caught up in something.”

Evidence of that something was on his face and neck. There was a cut along Will's bottom lip and a bruise poking out behind his collar. *The victims did not struggle*, he reminded himself. *No other DNA besides mine was found.*

Suspicion morphed into concern as he noted yet another bruise on Will's wrist. Was he going out on his own trying to save people the NYPD missed? Had his FBI coworkers found out he'd been poking his nose into this case?

All too easily he recalled the merciless taunts and ‘accidental’ punches he'd received for even making a suggestion when he worked for the FBI.

What happened to you? he thought, taking a hold of Will's wrist.

Wincing Will looked to the floor.

He thought about the scar along his forehead. *Who tried to get into his head?* Just thinking about how someone could hurt Will ignited anger in his chest. He already had plenty to be angry about.

Everything was so messed up. Having Will here helped. They could figure out this whole mess together.

Together sounds wonderful, he thought leaning in. As though he were a thirsty man he latched onto Will's lips and greedily drank in the rush of elation that hit. He wanted to kiss Will for a million years. Although Will didn't push him away he felt the action was one sided.

Fuck he thought as he released his grip.

Malcolm kissed so differently than Hannibal. There was more of a desperation to be accepted in Malcolm's movements. Where Malcolm asked Hannibal would demand. Reaction where there would be action and teasing. It was different but not horrible.

"I'm sorry" Malcolm threw his face into his hands.

"We do impulsive things when we're stressed," he said gently coaxing him out of the self-berating he knew was taking place in his mind. He'd been in a similar situation once, he could spare them of the loathing that came from acting on such impulse.

"I told you last time it's alright. You're not the only one in this room who has kissed someone to seek a sense of stability when it felt as though the world had begun to cave in." He began to smooth out Malcolm's hair. "At least yours was because of a bad day. I kissed a coworker because I was convinced a raccoon was in my chimney. You thankfully have not added property damage to the embarrassment."

Malcolm laughed. "Too early to count that out. Once you leave I might start breaking things." That wouldn't do. He couldn't let stolen kisses create a wedge between them.

"Then you should get out of here. Join me for dinner at my place."

Dinner with Will at his place? Every word of that sentence seemed so odd. He could understand wanting to take him out for food to eliminate the awkwardness but no normal person invited their acquaintance who kissed you twice to your home for dinner.

And yet he couldn't pass on the opportunity. No one who knew him invited him over to their place. It was another act of normalcy that had been taken away the moment the police had escorted his father out of his home in cuffs.

The travel to wills seemed unnecessarily complicated; a walk for a few blocks, a thirty-minute bus ride, more walking, then a cab.

“You are doing a good job of throwing them off,” he whispered.

“Who?”

“Whoever you think is following us.”

“It’s a habit. It’s always better to assume you’re being followed.”

The comment felt as though he’d unintentionally stepped into an active minefield. Again he noted the bruising around Will’s wrists.

“If it makes you feel better, people actively avoid me.” Gripping his shaky hand he felt words weigh heavy on his tongue.

“This is it.” Will said, rushing him to the door so quickly he couldn’t familiarize himself with where they were or even the color of the building.

The interior was drastically different from what he imagined. Where fishing poles and dog photos should’ve been were replicated pictures of art. There was nothing out of place, no thrown papers on the floor or strange displays like he had in his own loft. It barely felt like an apartment at all, more like an actual house. There were clear divisions of the space: a bookshelf covered in classic literature doubled as a wall of the dining room. His own open floor plan seemed shameless in comparison.

“Your coat,” Will pointed out.

“Sorry.” *He even has a coat rack?* “Did this place come with the furniture?” he teased as he hung up his coat. “It’s not really you.”

“That would be my doing,” a low voice said from behind.

Turning around he saw a man a few inches taller than him, clean-shaven, his slicked hair reminding him of the past affluent classmates, and his sharp cheekbones were something anyone would give millions to attain. There was a silent composed demeanor to him, his suit on the other hand screamed. It practically radiated a notice me sign; being composed of a wine red plaid pattern that belonged on a couch, coupled with a light pink vest and fuchsia tie. Mother would kill over at the sight. And yet it looked distinguished on the man. He had to be the landlord or Will’s roommate.

Will’s eyes ran up and down him as if a last minute change of wardrobe would help quell their guest’s suspicions. In truth, he could dawn any clothing even the wildest outfit imaginable and still be convinced that it was normal. Appearing normal was a staple, a necessity even, but he’d always tested the line people drew. Luxurious suits patterns no man

in the business world would wear all were so easily excused because to most money or a show of wealth entitled you a form of strange proclivities.

The lack of personality in Malcolm Bright's attire was as telling as disappointing. The monotonous appearance pointed to the man's desire to be perceived as another suit clad man in New York. Such an act was futile. A pig dressed in any style remains a pig. Although this pig had his curiosity.

You looked as though you were the cat who caught the cannery the moment you stepped in but you are no cat are you? he thought, letting a smile of his own grace his face. "It's very nice to meet you, Mr. Bright." He extended a hand that was taken as if on autopilot.

"I'm at the disadvantage of not knowing your name."

"How rude of you Will," Hannibal smirked

"Malcolm this is,"

"Hannibal." Ignoring Will's unmistakable warning 'not to say it' he tightened his grip. "I'm Will's husband." He reveled in the second the words registered, the beat of silence, the limpness of Bright's hand in his, and the light in his eyes fade. *Wonderful how a few choice words could crush a man's spirit.*

The floor had been ripped out from under him. It was time he was swallowed whole by it. It would be worlds better than remaining here shaking the hand of a man who not only appeared far more put together than he ever could be but this was Will's husband.

"Is there a problem?" Hannibal asked.

Will's husband. "No. of course not." *This was Will's husband.* "I didn't realize that you were married." He looked to Will, hoping for a lifeline.

"I'm not." Will hung up his scarf.

Relief began to fill him.

"Must you be so technical?" In a swift motion Hannibal took Will's hand and spun him into a kiss. "He's my fiancé."

The clarification didn't ease the sinking feeling. He needed to escape. Needed to walk out that door and into oncoming traffic. That would be the only thing capable of easing this feeling. But he couldn't leave. The one and only exit were currently blocked. He was trapped.

"I didn't mean to shock you." Hannibal smiled. "I shall leave you two for a moment."

I hate you. Will tried to send that thought towards Hannibal's retreat towards the kitchen.
What do I do about this?

“I’m sorry about him he’s-”

“-your fiancé?”

Why did this feel as though he'd been two timing Malcolm? “It’s complicated.”

Complicated hardly defined it.

Sighing he sank into the couch. How to explain him and Hannibal was unintelligible. If not impossible. He could kill Hannibal for putting him in such a position.

“Is it an undercover situation?” There was hope behind those words.

“No.” It would be a decent explanation but that would encourage Malcolm’s interest in him.

“No,” he repeated, touching his bruised wrist. “Do you need help?”

Leaning even closer Malcolm whispered. With the harshest glare he could muster he spoke decisively “I didn’t bring you here to save me from him.”

“Sorry I didn’t mean to-” Malcolm juttet back.

Sighing, he settled the urge to strangle Malcolm for the insult. “What’s going on with the case? Has our next victim appeared?”

Concern Malcolm glanced towards the kitchen. Seemingly deciding that the classical music was enough to prevent Hannibal from eavesdropping, Malcolm joined him on the couch. The hesitation to pull out the contents of his messenger bag didn’t sit well. With his left hand he felt for the seam of the couch. Slowly he tugged on its loose thread. Inside was an oyster shucking knife that he’d stashed a few days after they'd gotten this place.

Malcolm muttered something as he pulled out stacks of paper that had once been spread over his fool. Somehow he’d have to sneak the autopsy reports back into the mix.

“I’m surprised it's not all over the news yet.”

It wasn’t until those words were spoken that Will realized he hadn’t turned on the t.v. since the night before.

“I couldn't get any more information.”

“Got caught?”

“Worse.” Malcolm rubbed the back of his neck. “I was kicked off the case.”

“Shit.”

Malcolm chuckled. "I appreciate the sentiment. It doesn't mean I will stop. They are looking at it all wrong, I know it." Malcolm laid out a large parchment that was as wide as a road map. "These are the possible connections. I've categorized them so far but each one ended as soon as it started. I traced victim one, Dorean's, phone history and matched it to the others. No matching numbers or even an unlisted one.

"This killer wouldn't have made a call."

"There's always some mark, some trace the killer left behind. A pattern is in here. I even looked at physical similarities but there was again nothing. Not even their height was consistent."

"Have you thought about the locations themselves?" he said, moving a few markers around.

"I wish we were at the station. It was all pinned perfectly" Malcolm grumbled. This time he did pull out a map of New York.

Behind the wall division Hannibal watched Mr. Bright cover his living area with confidential papers. This man had to be the NYPD's worst nightmare. He clearly had little mind to keep other people's homes clean while laying out viable knowledge to someone.

This compulsion ever so dipping into obsession over the case intrigued him. It reminded him a lot of how Will was; the desperation to catch the monster constructed and empathize within his mind. But Malcolm was different, perhaps more neurotic, than Will, or that too may have been performative. Throughout his years he'd seen many ways for people to cope and get by in the world appearing normal. A perfectly tailored human suit that's what Bedellia had once told him, though it was a fact that many people did move about life tailoring one aspect or another of themselves to gain what they wanted. He almost pitied this man for having cracks so large, one look at the three of them and anyone could pinpoint that Malcolm was on the verge of a mental breakdown.

Hannibal had to admit that compared to Will Malcolm was an open book that frankly he had read many times before. Will on the other hand seemed to have finally started on a new chapter of his story.

Since their supposed demise it had been a strenuous couple of years to hold back his hunger. To the outside it would seem that this domestic lifestyle had tamed him but that was not so. No one could tame him though Will did try in his own way. Will did know that he would never be a docile pup; he'd play the part if necessary however. The need to act docile was dwindling. Will had already begun to kill again. Their trophy remained in wait to be consumed. The next opportunity to hunt would be a proper one and not a copycat killing. Together he and Will would create art of their own design.

It would be a shame if you weren't around to see it , he thought looking at Malcolm.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, dinner is ready."

Once again it seemed as if Malcolm was remembering where he was. How soon would he realize that he had stepped into a lion's den?

"So Mr. Bright," he said as they took a seat.

"Malcolm is just fine," the man said, his left hand tensed aside from a minuscule tremor in his pinky finger.

Without looking he knew that Will too had noticed. It had been their job to notice such little details. It was this man's job as well. Was that what brought on the nerves? Did he actually know their true identities and had been playing dumb until now? If so this would be a very quick dinner.

Will seemed calm, well his carefully constructed version of calm. His heart thumped just a little at the sight. Hannibal knew very well how calm wasn't an attribute he could contribute to Will Graham; there was always a slight bounce in his step or scant glances. It was only that night at the edge of the cliff that he had seen true calm in those eyes. A deep acceptance of what was to come. What ending would be written this time had yet to be determined

"My soon-to-be *husband*," he emphasized his claim on Will. "tells me that you are in the same profession."

"Yes, it was a bit of a shock to see another profiler on the case."

"I'm sure he never meant to overstep. He has the tendency to not run headfirst into trouble" he said smoothly before taking a bite.

"People say I'm the same way" Malcolm nervously chuckled following his action.

There was an odd familiarity about this dinner. Perhaps it was the elegant meal right out of a five-star restaurant or the minimal chatter that reminded him of his own family. His mother would've approved of the setup. Clearly Hannibal had different taste than Will. Will he could see eating off a paper plate without care for proper etiquette. Hannibal would most likely shudder at the thought of it. Even the way Hannibal ate was so deliberate while Will did his best to recall which fork to use on which dish.

Opposites must really attract, he thought.

"You have a lovely home, and your cooking is divine," he said, calling upon years of manners schooled into him.

Hannibal smiled. "Why thank you. It has been a while since we've had such a well mannered guest."

"Well they are sorely missing out" he flashed a half-smile that seemed to make Will frown ever so slightly.

Hannibal placed a hand onto Will's, the action should've seemed sweet but there was this odd underlying current to the way their eyes met. For some odd reason it reminded him of his father.

No, he thought. There was hardly anything that warranted this response. *Although serial killers don't exactly announce the fact that's what they are* he thought slowly taking a sip of his drink. *I'm overthinking again. Maybe I'm uncomfortable for another reason... Like kissing an engaged man.*

He wanted to slap himself for doing that. Did Hannibal know? If he if would he be here now?

Will flashed him a nervous smile.

Or maybe a slap was too light if the urge to kiss Will again was any indication. *Don't think of that* . Light conversation was desperately needed. "So what do you do Hannibal?"

"I am a dutiful stay-at-home husband."

Will smiled as he made the smallest of head shakes. It felt as though he was looking into a side of their relationship that perhaps they'd never shown anyone before. Or maybe it was him who hadn't experienced more diversity in his sheltered upbringing. Although he held no hatred or even disgust for those sidelined in the circles that his mother operated in, he hadn't gone out of his way to befriend anyone or talk for that matter to anyone outside of his inner circle of colleges and family.

A part of him longed for the way Hannibal lifted Will's hand to place a chaste kiss before returning to his meal.

"With your cooking you could easily make a name for yourself if you opened a restaurant."

Hannibal grinned, "Making a name for myself is not a priority at the moment."

"I won't let him because he is a complete narcissist as it is."

"Will would have me chained to the floor if it was not for the fact that one of us is superior in picking the freshest of ingredients."

"It was one time," Will exclaimed like a child being scolded.

"My poor Will lugged a watermelon for who knows how long only for it to be severely ripe. I thought the stench would never leave the house."

This was all so strange Will had to admit. What this silly production they were putting on accomplished he didn't know. This was far different from dinners they had alone or the one where Jack Crawford was in attendance. The worst thing was how nice it felt to be loose around another person in their home. All the tension coiled around him had eased as time passed and embarrassing stories about him were recalled, of course adjusting location and reason when needed.

To be honest he loved hearing Hannibal's edited version much better than the reality. The base of it was true enough; them meeting on a case he was working on, gaining a friendship that led to something more, but the fine details, the betrayals that took place, the madness that had consumed the both of them as they fought were all washed away.

The new story, the one of a man who retired from his psychiatry practice after assisting on an FBI case, was nice. Hannibal had even given him a more heroic position in the FBI, an actual agent with no blemishes to his reputation. A celebrated profiler.

Laughing at the way Hannibal and Malcolm spoke about the fine arts he almost believed that version of life had been the truth while everything else was some fever dream.

He couldn't be swayed with what-ifs. There was blood on his hands once more. And there was a limit to the things he could do to throw Malcolm off his trail. Already he had to sneak the autopsy reports back. They weren't of need anymore.

Hannibal tapped against his glass. "Thank you for joining us for dinner, Bright. Now as customary I tell a few jokes."

Jokes? Since when do you tell jokes at dinner?

"What is a boat full of psychiatrists labeled as?"

"What?" Malcolm asked.

"A Freudian ship."

"Where did you come up with that?" he groaned.

"How many psychiatrists does it take to change a tire?"

"How many?"

"One. The tire should have the motivation to change itself."

Pushing from his seat he muttered an "Excuse me," leaving Malcolm to the mercy of bad jokes he retrieved what he took from Malcolm.

"He lacks the capacity for humor. There's too much going on in his beautiful mind. You seem to appreciate it," Hannibal sipped from his cup.

Somehow he wasn't sure if Hannibal was referring to the jokes or Will's mind.

"It's a shame that such bad news has led you to join our table tonight."

"Bad news?"

“Your struggle with the case. Will has been up at night trying to piece it together. He’s usually able to connect the dots a lot quicker.”

Is he implying that I am holding him back?

“I have no doubt that the answers will reveal themselves to Will in due time.”

“I hope so too.”

“Those who lack imagination seldom see their own potential. Tell me Mr. Bright, do you have imagination?”

He could imagine a lot. Right now he was imagining himself on the chopping block. Hannibal had to have known about the kiss. Was Hannibal a jealous man? A vengeful one?

“I do.”

Hannibal smiled. “That Is good. It's not every day that Will finds someone with an imagination that resembles his own. Spending more time together he could help you manage the craft.”

“It would be nice to work with Will again after this case though I doubt that could happen.”

“You only wish to work cases with him?” Hannibal asked his fine brow raising as if to tell him that he knew there was more to it than just business. “It's amusing what we are able to give away while observing someone else.”

He knows.

“Honesty is a staple component to any relationship’s foundation. Will had mentioned the kiss.”

Kisses he mentally corrected in horror.

Hannibal let out a small huff of laughter. “Don't be so tense. Do you think I will boil you down into broth?”

He gulped.

“Will is a difficult man to resist in either professional curiosity or the enjoyment of his company. However such a spur of the moment action can be due to the cocktail of anxiety and adrenaline of working on the case.”

“Exactly” he sighed. “I thought as much. I’m-”

“No need for apologies. Just don't make a habit out of it.”

“Please tell me the jokes are done,” Will said as he returned to the dining room.

“Afraid so” Hannibal smirked.

What did you do? he thought Malcolm seemed to be physically in one piece but Hannibal knew how to tear a man apart without even touching him.

“It appears to be getting late” Hannibal noted without so much glancing at the clock.

“I didn't realize the time I should be going.” Malcolm stood up instantly. “Thank you for dinner, it was delicious.”

Will couldn't interpret the way Malcolm's feet hesitantly took a side step. Did he want to run away or did he want to stay? If he were in his shoes he wouldn't know which one to choose either.

Why would anyone want to stay here? His thought was interrupted as Hannibal took his hand and helped him out of his seat.

“We'll show you out.”

“No, that is alright. Good night Hannibal, Will.”

Giving a nod he watched the man leave.

“You're pouting,” Hannibal remarked the second the door shut.

“I'm not.”

“Should I prepare meals for three more often?”

“This is ridiculous,” he said, eyes glancing at their intertwined hands.

“How so?”

“We are supposed to be laying low,” he said, taking his hand out of Hannibal's. “And before you say anything I know I'm the one who messed up.” He tousled his hair. The coiling of anxiety returned in full force. Like a suppressed hiccup it bounced out of him sending his feet pacing. “I shouldn't have brought him here. He shouldn't have met you.”

“Ashamed of your husband?”

“We are not married. That's a fantasy, this whole night was.”

An arm snaked around his hip, steadying him instantly. “Would you want it to be a reality?”

“What would that even look like? What would our names be Will Lector? Hannibal Graham?”

“We would make our own name. When have any social constructs ever applied to us?”

“You can't be serious,” he said in a voice above a whisper.

“It's hardly a difficult task. For all this time I thought of you as mine.”

Damn why does he always seem to make me feel like an idiot? “It was still wrong to bring Malcolm.”

“There is nothing wrong with befriending a kindred spirit.”

“Is that what he is now?”

“Unless he becomes a threat.”

He sighed. “It's more like he's a mix of the two of us.”

“Are you suggesting we adopt him?”

“Are you serious about becoming a real stay-at-home dad?”

He jolted a little as Hannibal's head rested against the crook of his neck. “If that is what you desire. We weren't such bad parents with Abigail.”

“That hardly ended well.”

Perhaps he shouldn't have mentioned their sudo-daughter. She was alive and well but he knew that Will felt as though they had abandoned her. After everything, there had been no time to reconnect. Besides, he knew that Will wouldn't forgive himself for putting her in a position where she had to hide once more.

Nearing a year after their deaths he had looked into the possibility of reuniting their murderous family but once Will realized that the book deal Freddie Lounds had released with Abigail's supposed truth there was no turning back. For Abigail it was best that they were fleeting memories.

“I want a dog,” Will said suddenly.

“Will,”

“You asked me what I desired,” he mocked. “I want a dog.”

“Completely out of the question” he whispered a hint of threat but Will didn't shudder at it like before. From the way he leaned back he'd been expecting the reaction. “Have I gotten so predictable?”

“Only on this one topic” Will teased, all too easily slipping from his grasp.

He allowed Will to grip his tie as he pushed him back against the edge of the couch. If he were capable of feeling fear there would be no reason to whenever Will got like this. First hand he'd seen the man's strength, his ruthlessness when necessary but so had Will. After so

long they knew each other inside and out. They complimented each other in ways that no one else could. Gladly they would devour one another.

Perhaps it was just him being cocky but like this he always felt more in control. Logic told him that Hannibal was letting him think that, if he wanted to, he could reverse the situation in a second. That was how they were now this give and take in power that could only come from their cat and mouse games cementing into a partnership.

“You didn’t offer Malocm part of our trophy did you?” he asked.

“We should talk to someone about your inability to trust your husband” Hannibal smirked as he reached up to tuck a strand of hair behind his ear. “Rest assured that tonight’s meal was simple pork.”

Lies were nothing but a tool in both of their arsenal, but this was the truth. In moments like this Hannibal was strangely candid.

“You have sustained me thus far.”

“So I no longer have to worry about you sinking your teeth into someone else?”

“I’m more concerned about someone else sinking their teeth into you.”

He couldn’t help the little laugh or the way his face warmed. “Tonight,”

He slipped his fingers in between Hannibal’s once more.

“It was lovely.”

Hannibal placed a kiss onto his bruised neck.

A Shift

Between the ringing phone and his constant pacing, Malcolm was sure that his downstairs neighbors also didn't get sleep. Sleep was the least of his worries. Top of the list should've been the case but once again it was Will. As awkward as dinner went he had to admit that last night wasn't the absolute worst. Perhaps that was the problem. If Hannibal had tossed him out the moment he stepped into their home then maybe he wouldn't be yet again thinking about shared kisses and the thrill of hearing Will laugh. Despite everything, he had actually enjoyed himself in their company.

The chime of his morning alarm went off. Brushing a hand down his face he silenced it. Envy crept up as he moved to his pills. He envied Hannibal. Will had been the first person he'd been able to connect with in a long time.

"The pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty- Winston Churchill" read his affirmation.

"What do you mean by that?" he laughed before swallowing his pills.

Cloud nine couldn't compete with this morning, Will thought as he woke wrapped in thick blankets and the smell of breakfast wafting up from the kitchen. There had been many mornings like this since the fall but for once he didn't question it. For once he didn't fear Jack coming to rip it away. Perhaps he should have questioned such a gift. He didn't want to. It had been enjoyable to have Malcolm over, although he'd never been into having guests, Hannibal thrived in such a setting.

He would have excelled in the restaurant business. It would only be a question of what meat he would use, he thought, bringing a small smile to his face.

Starting a business was as much fantasy as fly fishing in the middle of New York, still it was a nice thought.

"Are you joining me or should I bring our meal to bed?" Hannibal asked, appearing in the doorway.

"I don't want to get up yet" He pushed more into his cozy cocoon. If Hannibal wanted to kill him at this moment he doubted he would bother getting up.

Not missing a beat, Hannibal came in with breakfast already on a tray. "You seem to be in a good mood."

Taking their orange juice from the tray he made room on the bed. "You seem pleased as well."

"How can I not be my dear husband?"

“Not married,” he teased. Hannibal’s instance of that label gave him a surge of excitement. He wouldn’t accept such a label until Hannibal put in the proper effort. Or maybe he would hold onto the label forever. It was nice to have something to tease Hannibal with.

With Hannibal leaning down over him it was difficult to not spill.

“I should do something about your rudeness.”

“It's too late for that” he nipped at Hannibal's Adam's apple.

Exhaling, Hannibal took one glass from his hand and settled on the edge of the bed. “A toast to Malcolm Bright, our honorable guest who had provided needed entertainment and his prominent removal from the case.”

“He’s not going to stop.”

“That’s what I'm counting on. So when can I expect him to return to our abode?”

“You want him back so soon?”

“Is our home not open to strays?”

“Malcolm” Ainsley’s voice sounded through his phone. She had become just as insistent as mother with her voicemails.

Delete.

“Stop screening your calls.”

Delete.

“What is going on with the case? Where are you?”

Delete.

“Are you having one of your episodes? I can’t make it over until four.”

Delete

“Damit Malcolm, I'm the younger one. Pick up your phone!”

Delete.

“My boy,”

Immediately he deleted that voice mail.

He didn’t want to receive calls from any of his family right now. All he needed was a call from Gil putting him back onto the case.

An unfamiliar number appeared on his phone. Contemplating answering it he watched the phone buzz across his corner table.

Is it the killer? Please be the killer he thought as he answered the call.

“Hello?” In the beat of silence he felt his heart lurched. All he needed was one final clue to point him in the right direction. “Hello?”

“Mr. Bright.” Hannibal's voice came from the other side. “I hope you don't mind me calling on you.”

How did he get my number?

“Perhaps Will shouldn't have shared your number.”

“No it's alright.”

“This is a formal invitation for dinner this evening if you are inclined to join us.”

“I...” He looked around at his lonely mess of an apartment.

“I assure you there will be ample time for you and Will to work on your project.”

I.. I want to see Will again. Hannibal's inviting me so it must be alright.

“Frankly dinner would be so dull without your appreciation of my jokes.”

“I would be honored to join you,” he said, smiling into the phone.

“Warning you now Hannibal has been in the kitchen practically all day,” Will said as they took the last stretch of their journey.

Just because Hannibal was fine with Malcolm over didn't mean he was willing to give out their address. There was a hint of disappointment at how little Malcolm questioned him. Was his infatuation that blinding or had he built up Malcolm's intelligence in his paranoid thoughts?

“Is that a good or a bad thing?”

“Depends on how much room you have in your stomach.”

Thoroughly entertaining Hannibal thought as he watched over the proceedings of files shared over his living room once again. If granted permission he was sure Malcolm would string up paper in a messy web.

“You seem to have quite the time on your hands” he commented as he picked up one of the several news clippings from the stack. If given a little nudge Malcolm would go from seeking

answers in such clipping to creating his own headlines

"I couldn't sleep," Malcolm rubbed his eyes.

"Perhaps I should get you something for your sleepless nights?"

"No thank you. I have medication, they've just not been working lately."

"It's the added stress."

Malcolm nodded.

"The NYPD are fools to dismiss you."

"They had no choice."

"I don't see why. You are very thorough." He offered a finger sandwich. Will snatched one as he adjusted his glasses. *He only looks vulnerable with them*, he thought.

"This bastard is toying with me. They found my hair on one of the recent victims."

A look was exchanged between Hannibal and Will that he couldn't quite read.

"Do you have any enemies?" Hannibal asked curiously.

"Depends on who you ask" he chuckled.

Before Hannibal could say anything else the oven timer went off.

"Do you think the killer's message is for you?" Will jumped in, laying another news clipping on the side.

"No. I can't be the intended target. There would be no reason to go through all of this to relay a message to me. It could've been a mistake." He ran a hand through his hair. "I'm not exactly careful around crime scenes or the autopsy room."

"Lucky for us we still have these," Will said, lifting up the autopsy reports.

When had he found those? "Reckless, not lucky" he corrected.

"Whichever gets results."

"That's the thing" he huffed. "I don't have anything to show for our work aside from two more bodies."

"Two?" Will's eyes grew large. For the first time since laying things out Will looked concerned.

"The other night two bodies were found within a block of each other."

“Damit,” Will muttered.

“Why would this killer escalate now?” Malcolm rose to his feet. “Am I not looking at it right? There's nothing connected at all.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” he said, spreading out the slippings he had been sorting.

“There's a pattern if you compare not only these cases but similar ones over the past year then you have this. Groups of three to four supposed random killings. According to Ms. Ainsley, they’re all in this area. Previous victims had their hearts taken.”

“How did I miss that?” he asked, snatching the autopsy reports.

“Safe to assume these victims were missing hearts as well.”

“Why the hearts? Why these people?”

“You were right, you were looking at the wrong connection. Our killer is practicing for the big event, but not without consideration. It’s not a matter of a type of victim, it's the occupation. All were in some branch of the service industry.”

“Dorean was catering events under the table. The man was a delivery driver for a catering company, and those teens were part-timers too. Then why the missing hearts? Another distraction? A calling card?”

“It was a warning of judgment. These people are his stepping stones to who he truly wants to judge.” Will tapped the clippings. “His sense of alienation is directed towards a specific person or group. These everyday people are both a means to an end and justification for his actions. Every move was a point of necessity.”

“What about the break-in at the cupcake shop? Ainsley was certain there was a connection there.”

“There is,”

“That was an attempted robbery.”

“No, it wasn't a robbery. The teen attacked would’ve been our killer’s second victim.”

“How do you-”

“That teen we briefly met-”

Realization hit quickly. “Why wouldn't you disclose that? According to the file-”

“I'm sorry I didn't mean to hide it from you. I didn't want old coworkers finding me sticking my nose into situations again. You understand don't you?”

“What are you hiding?”

“That I was there as well,” Hannibal said as we entered the room with fresh drinks. “He was trying to protect me.”

“Tell me everything.”

“There's not much to tell. Will heard a scream and like a good samaritan went to help. The attacker was a skilled fighter and got away.”

Do I trust them? Why would they lie?

Everything Will had said made sense.

“So these victims-”

“Are means to get closer to the target.”

“But why two bodies at once?”

“We shouldn’t rule out a copycat killer,” Hannibal suggested. “Such public displays are prone to inspire”

“Could you get me another drink?” Will asked.

“Of course.”

“Don't mind him he always was to put his two cents into everything. Drives me insane sometimes.” Will sighed.

It made him wonder if the two ever spent nights hunched over stacks of files or bounced off ideas of motive off one another. Again he felt a pang of envy. *I'm stuck in the middle of this.*

“These killings are cathartic for him,” Will continued. “Its presentation is based on the need to be seen. Our killer wants the attention of someone who they can’t gain. Someone with a higher status.”

“The first victim may have wanted the same. According to my mother she catered all high profile events.”

“Taking her place would achieve his goal.”

“So our final victim would be a wealthy one attending a high profile event .”

“It would be the most likely place,” Hannibal said, impressively keeping up with their conversation.

He smiled. “Would you like to join me at a Gala this weekend?”

“We would be delighted to.”

Proposal

They were one step closer to solving the case but instead of feeling relief or motivated to see it to the end, Malcolm felt conflicted. Gil had been clear about not returning to the station. He could call in an anonymous tip but what if on the off chance JT or Dani answered the call and recognized his voice. Would they ever trust him again? None of them had even bothered to contact him.

I don't need them to solve this case, he thought.

Again he found himself pacing. There were only a few days until the Gala. After that, would Will still visit him? Would he be allowed to go to Will's place? It was hard to know where he fit with Hannibal and Will.

Bzzz. Bzzz.

Claremont's number flashed on his phone. He should've ignored it but as if on autopilot he answered the call.

"Why do you keep calling me?" he growled into the phone.

"I just want to be kept in the loop with your budding love life," his father said.

What are you a gossiping teenager? he thought as his thumb hovered above the end call button.

"I doubt you're telling anyone else about this Will person. It's important to talk things out."

"That was over before it started. He has a fiancee."

"That's hardly a dead end. Your mother was promised to a well-off fellow before we met."

"I don't want to hear about that," he muttered.

It still hurt to remember just how much in love his parents were. They had been the envy of every unhappy couple. Everyone could see without a doubt that they'd truly loved one another. He had shattered that the moment he turned his father into the police.

"I'm nothing like Hannibal. He's an excellent cook."

"Not a common name Hannibal." His father pondered for a moment. "I'm sure you could take a cooking class or two."

"That won't change anything."

There was a pause before his father spoke again. "A little bird told me you were kicked off the case."

And whose fault is that? he thought. So many things would be better if it wasn't for you. If it weren't for you I could've had friends. People wouldn't jump to the conclusion that I'm one bad day away from becoming a killer. I wouldn't have felt so mixed up my entire life. I could've stayed with the FBI. I could've met Will earlier. I could've been in Hannibal's place.

“Goodbye Dr. Whitly,” he managed to say before ending the call and throwing his phone onto his bed.

Precariously he knocked on Bright's door.

“It's open mother” Bright called from the other side of the door.

“Despite not being your mother I hope you don't mind me coming in,” he said as he stepped through the doorway

Embarrassment colored Bright's face. He had yet to slip into his formal attire, his hair was sleep mused and clad in pajama bottoms that although had a high thread count had begun to lose their elastic integrity. The loft had yet to be discarded of extraneous papers and there was a sour smell from the refrigerator.

“Will is not with me today.”

“Did something happen?” Bright asked no longer concerned that he wasn't properly dressed.

“Simply out doing errands. May I have a seat?”

“Of course.” Bright hurried to remove some papers to make room for him.

“Is this a bad time?”

“I just had a frustrating call.”

“With the NYPD?” he feigned ignorance.

“Yes.”

Leaning into the seat he crossed his legs. “You'll ruin yourself in the pursuit of assisting everyone else and neglecting yourself. Will has similar issues.”

“I don't require therapy at this moment.”

Despite those words, Malcolm took the seat across from him.

“No, I believe what you need is something else that myself and Will can provide.”

“And what's that?”

“Understanding.”

“How can you understand me? No offense but we don't know much about each other.”

“I know who you are or to be more accurate who your father is.”

Malcolm startled, shrinking into the seat.

“Will is currently unaware of such a connection but he will not demonize you for it nor do I. You must have noted the scars on him. Jobs like yours come with the guarantee of a few. But like Will, not all were caused by his job. Your connection to your father causes you pain, most notable that tremor of yours.”

Malcolm stilled his hand.

“Do not be ashamed of it.”

He wanted to lie but already Hannibal had seen through him.

“You put so much on yourself. Wouldn't you rather unbidden yourself? How many more times can you piece yourself back together alone?”

“Are you planning on breaking me?”

“Merely pointing out the cage of your own making.”

“Are you offering a better cage?”

“Only if you're seeking one.”

He laughed. “What exactly are you suggesting?”

Hannibal's foot lightly tapped the ground. He couldn't tell if it indicated amusement or irritation. “You enjoy yourself in our company. I imagine relationships are a difficult aspect of your life. Both Will and I are similar in this regard.”

“So you want a friendship?”

“Would you be content with such limitations?”

He swallowed.

“I can offer you a place away from the shackles you have set here. A fine warm meal when you hunger. Will can provide the affection you've sought your entire adult life.”

“I don't-”

“Don't sell yourself short. You are aware of what you want and what I'm proposing. Neither of us can stand stupidity, genuine or otherwise.”

The atmosphere had shifted once more, Will noted, as all three of them shuffled through newspapers, online articles, and interviews done by an Ainsley Whitly. Malcolm didn't appear that happy to be going through her work but so far she had provided valuable information.

"We found the possible location but what of our killer?"

"I can't stand looking at this." Will clicked on the TV. "They're showing the Mummy!"

"Taking a break would be beneficial," Hannibal agreed.

"Please tell me you've seen this classic Malcolm."

"Maybe a while back?"

"Hannibal's never seen it."

"Will assures me that you look like this leading man."

"It's uncanny. I used to have the biggest crush on him." The Freudian slip surprisingly didn't infuriate Hannibal.

There was definitely something going on. "Hannibal, could you help me with the popcorn?"

"Of course."

"What did you do now?" He asked as he tossed the popcorn into the microwave.

Unphased Hannibal tucked a strand of hair behind his ear. "Signed a peace treaty of sorts."

"You are incredible," he let his words drip with sarcasm.

"Are we not all achieving the same goal?"

There was always a hidden agenda. What of the evidence planted on the victim to incriminate Malcolm? Had Hannibal changed his mind so much in such a short time?

The microwave timer went off.

"We should not keep Bright waiting," Hannibal smirked as he expertly escaped the confrontation with popcorn in hand.

His nerves were on fire. Will was wedged between Hannibal and himself. For the first few minutes of the movie, he could barely focus on anything besides keeping a minuscule space

between him and Will. He felt like being chaperones on a date. But that's not what this was. Was this a test? He could've been overthinking Hannibal's proposal. Did Will even know about it? He must've.

Hannibal seemed unbothered. His attention was on the screen as if studying what aspects of this film Will found enjoyable.

He should be watching too. Reaching for popcorn his hand met Will's. Testing the waters he didn't take his hand away immediately. A finger traced the back of his hand before leaving the bowl.

Hannibal could not relate to the movie protagonist nor could he see what similarities he shared with Bright. Both were inconsequential. Will had seemed to have fallen into the peace around them. Knowing that. He had created it made him less irritated about the sparse affection Will was granting Malcolm.

“What did you think?” Will asked as the credits rolled.

“It does make me wonder why you hadn't pursued becoming an archeologist.”

Will chuckled. “I probably would've if it was more like the movies. And that if it paid better.”

“I could see that.” Malcolm smiled.

“Will you be staying the night Bright? It's unsafe to go out at this hour.”

“I don't want to intrude,”

“I insist.”

“Are you sure you don't mind the couch?” Will asked passing him an extra blanket

“It's not a first for me.”

“Why do I doubt that?”

“Just because I come from a wealthy family doesn't mean I-”

Will raised his brow.

“Okay fine this is a first.”

“Pays to be honest,” Will said, tossing him a pillow. “If you are really uncomfortable I could call you a cab.”

“Hannibal is right, it'll be a bit dangerous at this hour.”

“If only your personal driver didn't have the day off.”

“I don't have a personal driver.”

“Perhaps you should think about getting one,” Will teased.

“Good night Will.”

“Good night Malcolm.”

As the lights clicked out he could've sworn he'd seen a shadow loom overhead.

I need to sleep.

A sound pricked his ears after some time had passed. Turning to the side he tried to ignore it but the fuzz of sleep had begun to fade and the sound clarified to thuds. Rhythmic thuds of a steady pace. His ears heated at the possible reason for such sound. They wouldn't stop. In fact, the sound grew louder as though it was played in surround sound.

Flinging off the blanket he moved up the stairs. He'd politely tell them to stop or... He didn't know what.

Their bedroom door was wide open. Unable to move or speak, he watched the curvature of Will's back as he held onto the headboard before tossing his head back while his lower half connected with Hannibal's. Sweat glistened off his skin and curls flew widely as he moved widely up and down. He longed to be in Hannibal's position, to have his hands at Will's side guiding him.

Hannibal's hand tilted his face towards the door. Both pairs of eyes were on him now. Neither made a dash to cover up or chase him away. Instead, Hannibal smirked his hand motioning him closer. “Watching or participating?” he asked with a slight purr to his voice.

That couldn't be a real offer.

Will smiled as he grinded against Hannibal.

He wanted that.

Time to act seemed to be closing. Before it could end all together he crossed the threshold and stripped from his shirt.

Locking his lips Will beckoned him closer. Before he knew it he was pulled in. Swept in a sea of tangled limbs unsure where one person ended and another began. There was a warmth around him like one he'd never known. He reached for it every time someone moved. With each kiss upon his skin and the occasional hard touch, he fell deeper into this indescribable feeling. He'd been granted flight, an escape from all that laced outside of this moment and this bed.

Thunk.

Wincing Will looked over to the couch where Malcolm had just fallen off. "I'm sorry did I wake you?"

"What?" Malcolm frantically scrambled to unwrap the blanket from his face and clicked on the lamp. "Um." Malcolm's face was a scarlet red.

"Bad dreams?"

"Sort of" Malcolm gulped.

He motioned to the milk in his hand. "Would you like some?"

Blanket secured around him Malcolm stood and walked over.

"Cold?"

"Yeah."

Pouring the milk into a saucepan he began to warm it up. "I'm not sure if this actually works."

"It's supposed to promote melatonin. Can't say I've tried it out."

"Well now you can," he said, handing him a mug.

"Thank you for all of this."

"I just warmed up milk."

It's more than that he thought. This sort of comfort had become foreign to him over the years.

"Since we are both up, do you want to look through the reports for a suspect?"

"I was thinking the same thing."

Hannibal found both will and bright crashed upon the living room floor amongst the various newspapers and files. Taking a glance at the two stacks he noticed a similarity. Straightening up the space he went to begin breakfast.

By the time the bacon had crisped the two had risen from their sleep.

“Good morning gentlemen. How was your night?”

“Productive?” Malcolm yawned.

“We're close.” Will blindly reached for his cup of water.

“I believe you found him.” From his pocket he produced an image of a middle-aged man with an average appearance. “Meet our killer Laurence Frawley. He has been to all locations just out of focus in many of Ms. Ainsley's reporting. This is the clearest shot I could find.”

“I could kill you right now” Will growled as he tore through a piece of bacon.

“Do you feel the same, Bright?”

“Honestly. Yes.”

“Good,” he smiled. “Use that feeling as motivation towards catching Frawley.”

“Do I really need to do this?” Will complained as he stood in the middle of a tailor shop. “Why can't I borrow one of yours,” he asked over his shoulder to Hannibal.

“I don't have anything that will suit you. Besides, who are we to deny Bright's offer?”

“This isn't necessary Malcolm.”

“Unfortunately it is. If I am bringing along guests they need to meet certain criteria.”

“Which I don't have,” he sighed.

“That's not what I meant.” Malcolm looked to Hannibal as though he might get reprimanded for the comment.

He didn't know what was going on between them. It wasn't exactly walking on eggshells but Hannibal wasn't going out of his way to be kind. It wasn't outright hostility either. Hannibal called this peace. Peace wasn't built on nothing, especially when it came to Hannibal.

“Don't fret, I will school you on manners.”

“Have you forgotten your previous attempts? I'm impervious to manners.”

“You'll only need the basics.” Malcolm helpfully added. “It'll mostly be small talk.”

“I want to get Frawley before I make a fool of myself.”

“We'll ensure that you won't make a fool of yourself.”

Envy crept up again as Hannibal guided Will's skewed tie into place. They looked picture perfect. He was just an interloper. Or was he?

“Bright, you have purchased a suit from here as well, correct?” Hannibal asked.

“Yes.”

“What color?”

“Blue”

Hannibal's eyes moved over him as if imagining the color on him. He didn't know if it was because of his dream or not that made his skin prickle under that look.

“Dark or light?”

“Light.”

Reaching over Hannibal pulled a light blue coat and held it out to him. “If you would join us,”

As he approached he couldn't help feel as though he were granted access to something no one had been offered before.

Slipping on the jacket Hannibal moved him into position right next to Will. He looked ridiculous with the short sleeves and mixed pattern. Will on the other hand looked exquisite in his dark blue suit. Aside from his wild hair and under eye bags enhanced by squared glasses, he could pass as an old classmate.

“We must make sure that our dear Will looks the part of your plus one.”

His heart fluttered at the suggestion of the words: *our will*. Whatever Hannibal meant by that went unclarified as Will chuckled.

“What are we, the three musketeers? Are we all going to be color coordinated down to our socks?”

“That won't be necessary nor would I wish to be clad in something so common,” said Hannibal.

“What do you have in mind?” he couldn't help ask.

Smirking, Hannibal pointed out the furthest mannequin dressed in a suit covered in purple flowers separated by a light gray inner vest.

“You can't be serious,” Will groaned.

“What better way to stand out?”

Again Malcolm had joined them for dinner. At this rate Will wondered if he would ever decline Hannibal's invitation. All of this was still so strange, more so was the ease at which all three of them could talk. Not about everything of course. Malcolm didn't know the truth about who he and Hannibal were or what they were about to eat.

The trophy taken from Frawley now laid in an artistic array on their plates. What he felt about sharing the heart with Malcolm and Hannibal he couldn't quite pinpoint.

"There's something I need to tell you before the Gala." Malcolm swallowed hard.

Hannibal nodded in support.

"We might face some resistance."

"Because of Hannibal's horrendous suit?"

"No. Well that will attract attention." He took a breath. "Most in attendance know of my family, to be more accurate knew my father, Dr. Martin Whitly."

At the lack of recognition, his hand began to tremble. If Will knew then he didn't have to explain. He didn't want to explain he wanted to jump right to the moment Will was disgusted with him or afraid. He wanted to get to the part where they decided to go their separate ways because of who he was.

"He's better known as The Surgeon. He killed several women when i was young." His hand vibrated violently against the dining table.

"They view you as a copy of your father."

Will didn't look put off but he didn't know the extent of how horrible things could be. Just by associating with him Will's reputation would falter. They should call all of this off.

Will's hand lay on top of his. For the first time their eyes met unobstructed by glasses. Those eyes seemed able to look far within him.

"You fear they'll be right one day and you resent them for it. Malcolm, your father's sins are not yours and even if they were we would forgive them."

"I believe you," he found himself saying.

“I don’t know how I feel about using Hannibal as bait.”

“Don't worry he's been a lure before” he said.

“With that suit how could he not be the perfect target for Frawley?”

Out of everyone else here, Hannibal oozed with debonair and wealth. Although he was grateful for Malcolm not involving the NYPD he didn't know what would happen to the other party guests. There was no sense in worrying about Hannibal. He would not go down without a fight.

Malcolm’s hand laid on his for a moment. “You can admit that you're worried.”

Flashing a reassuring smile he took Malcolm's hand. “We should do our job too. There'll be a lot of ways for Frawley to get in.”

Malcolm frowned. “We’ll have to start mingling with my mother.” Malcolm motioned behind him with a tilt of his chin.

“Charm or annoy?” he whispered.

“Charm unless you want a one-way ticket out of here.”

“Understood.”

“I have been looking for you” mother smiled but her grip on the stem of her wine glass held tension.

“Mother, I would like to introduce you to Will.”

“Will?” Mother’s eyes widened in surprise. She'd probably thought that his plus one would've been some girl he picked up just to make a scene or one of his coworkers. He'd never want to have either Edrisa, Dani or JT endure this sort of torture. Not that they would willingly volunteer now that they knew whose son he was. He hadn't even heard from them since getting kicked out of the station. That didn't matter. He didn't want them here anyway. He had Will and Hannibal to support him tonight.

“No surname?”

I don't know his last name, he realized.

“I like to maintain an ounce of mystery,” Will said smoothly, placing a kiss onto mother’s hand. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance Ms. Whitly.”

“Well you're a step up from Malcolm’s previous guests” She smiled, her hand on the stem relaxing.

“I shall take that as a compliment.”

“As you should, the last guest was a monkey.” she shook her head. “A literal monkey.”

“A chimpanzee is an ape,” he corrected.

“Regardless it was a complete disaster once it got into the wine.”

“It is a shame I couldn’t have been there to see it” Will beamed at him.

“I’ll tell you all the sordid details later.”

“Yes, later.” Mother agreed. “I need to speak to Agnes but please enjoy yourself Will.”

“That wasn't horrible” Will whispered.

Emboldened by mother’s approval he slipped his arm the hook Will’s. “You are quite good at this.”

“It helps to know what people want to hear.”

Will did not fight it as he began to lead him around. If people were to talk about him he'd prefer it to be questions of who the man on his arm was instead of the usual gossip. Being like this with Will made him feel invincible against their scrutiny.

Will was careful to keep Hannibal within his peripheral vision as Malcolm tugged him around the space. Every now and then they were stopped and they had to give the same responses: “What a lovely event”, “You look lovely”, “A pleasure to make your acquaintance”. The script made this whole thing easier on him. That was the easiest part, his tie was cutting into him and his forearm was starting to itch from the rubbing of fabric against his skin. And his cheeks ached from smiling so much.

Only for a little longer, he reminded himself as he scanned the catering crew. Frawley could be hidden among any of them. A server, a valet, a security guard, they all had been his covers before.

It would happen here. Dead center of the room. He needs all eyes on the victim.

Who the target would be could depend on who was closest. He still held hope that Hannibal would prove a big enough lure for Frawley. That's all they had. The only backup could be Malcolm and he didn't look as alluring as Hannibal did.

Even as he played his role with Malcolm he watched how easily Hannibal inserted himself into mingling groups.

What did he say to make them all enraptured?

“Would you care for a dance?” Malcolm asked.

The people here were bores. All had the same uptown look and if he weren't so good with faces he'd swear he had already talked to this group. It was clear that all in attendance moved in close circles each following the same schedule and attending the same events. Hearing another golf story he could understand why Frawley would want to kill them. There were a few individuals that would make wonderful victims. Half of these guests however were drowning their livers and the others were puncturing their lungs with puffs of cigar smoke.

Shameful waste of organs.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Malcolm leading Will into a dance. Will moved not as smooth on the dance floor as Bright. All his upbringing had successfully instilled the skill to waltz. Poor Will was hardly keeping pace. He smirked at the pair's stumbling box step. He should've taught Will beforehand. Nearly falling, Will's laughter floated to his ear.

"You are bad at this," Malcolm laughed.

"Wasn't a priority growing up. Not much waltzing when working on boat motors." Will stumbled again. "So much for not making a fool of myself."

"Not at all. Most of these people are so uptight I don't think they could dance anything besides a waltz."

"May I cut in?" Hannibal asked, seemingly appearing out of nowhere.

"Of course."

Exchanging partners he continued to dance keeping close to the two. With Hannibal Will barely touched the ground. Envy panged. It was ridiculous to feel so jealous.

As the music picked up-tempo, so did he. His dance partner hardly registered to him as he weaved around other couples to get back to Hannibal and Will.

"May I cut in," he asked, taking Will's hand once more.

"Have you seen anything?" Will asked as they moved once more to the center.

Notably, Will's footwork had improved.

"Nothing yet has Hannibal?"

"No, but,"

"May I cut in?" Hannibal asked, grabbing hold of Will.

Chasing after them he all but threw his partner at them. This time, however, Hannibal volunteered to dance with him.

“You are losing sight of what we are trying to accomplish,” Hannibal said, taking on the leading position. Something was whispered into his ear but he couldn't register it over the band they had moved closer to. The volume of the strings stunned him until they came to an end.

“You have been a wonderful dance partner” Hannibal smiled, leaving to speak with yet another cluster of people.

“I need a break,” Will huffed.

From a safe distance away from the dance floor Will nursed a drink. If he didn't the room would spin for an eternity. He didn't appreciate being in the middle of Hannibal and Malcolm's dance off but for now, he didn't want to investigate the meaning of it. It was best saved for after Frawley was caught.

“I'm sorry,” Malcolm said, swishing his glass of champagne. “I didn't mean for our dance to end up that way.”

“It's not completely your fault.” He took a sip of his champagne. It was disgusting. *What is going on between you two?*

“I didn't mean to act childish. I'm not used to ...well any of this.”

“Neither am I” he smiled. He hadn't cared about anyone aside from Hannibal in a long time. It was strange to feel anything for Malcolm. Let alone enjoy being his arm candy for the night. “When did I become the prize to be fought over?” He laughed.

“You're not something to be won.”

“Are you going to tell me you love me for my mind as well as my looks?” he teased.

How could whatever this was last with Malcolm? It seemed such a tenuous thing. After they caught Frawley what would become of them? He hardly knew Hannibal's sincerity of this arrangement.

In a sudden *bang*, the sounds of chatter and clicking cups stopped. In its place were screams and a secondary bang.

“What's going on?” Malcolm asked caught between the instinct to fight and or take Will and run.

“Seems our special guest has arrived,” Will said noticing Frawley below.

They had to act quick, they had to-

“Look out” Will said, pulling him behind the wall just before the bullets hit. “Okay I wasn't thinking he would pull out a gun. Gun's weren't intimate enough of a killing method. It goes against the profile. What happened to the sledgehammer?”

“They're just warnings,” Will said, surprisingly calm. “Remember he's after a specific victim. “He'll go after Hannibal.” Peering behind the wall Will remained low.

" We didn't plan for a gun” he argued.

"It looks like our plan is backfiring.” Frawley locked eyes on them.

Being dragged along, Will hurried up the steps. He couldn't think about the others in the ballroom, not when the sound of ricochet bullets and heavy footsteps were ascending on them. What he would've given for a weapon. This is what he got for not calling in backup. Kicked off the case be damned. If they lived through this his mother would lecture him to death.

“We can't keep running like this” he found himself saying as they passed another flight of stairs. *Just how many stairs were there?*

Where was Will leading them? How much longer would they be followed?

Without warning Will threw the nearest door open and shoved him inside.

“Do you trust me?” Will asked in a breathless whisper.

“Yes.” Of course he did. He wouldn't have run all this way with him if he didn't.

“Okay,” Will said with the hint of a sad smile. Before he could even begin to question what this look meant he felt lips on his and a light pressure. Slowly his vision blurred to black.

Frawley's chest heaved in deep grunts as he glared at him. His lips curled into a snarl.

He had to keep Frawley away from the other guests. Why had he come after them?

In blurring speed, Frawley lunged for him. Gripping his head was the last thing he felt before a hard cut to nothing.

Storming the stairs Hannibal sniffed the air following the scent of Bright's horrible cologne.

There you are he thought as he kicked open the door. Bright laid unconscious on the floor.
“Will?”

Silence.

“Will?”

Nothing.

None too gently he shoved smelling salt under Bright's nose.

“Hannibal?”

“Where's Will?”

All Things Must Come to an End

Waltzing into Claremont was one action that certainly would send Will into a tailspin but there was little prospect that they had to go on in order to find him. Malcolm believed that his father had some insight into this case. Judging by the strong security around here perhaps the man had a point. He could almost see Will tense as the security guard raked his eyes over him before swiping the card to let them through. Amongst the thoughts of Will he was already calculating ways to walk out if this whole endeavor went south.

Further they went, passing door after door until they came upon a bar-free room. To his side, Malcolm steadied his trembling hand before pushing through. He held back a step taking in the elaborate setting. A clear walled cell with filled bookshelves, an old television on a pushcart, a beautiful rug, and a desk covered in various papers. It reminded him of his office mixed with his own previous confinement cell. The only thing that stood out against the normal-looking room was the thick red line painted across the floor.

“My boy!” Malcolm’s father rejoiced.

This man had been here a while by the looks of his face as well as his surroundings. The way his hair wildly protruded from his head and face gave him a deranged look, but his eyes held strong conviction and intelligence that was not all that uncommon among people like him. If Will were here he’d be able to pick out every wicked act this man had done to deserve this sentence. He on the other hand saw that his man’s weakness; his son.

“Here for another capper?” the man chuckled, bouncing like an energetic toddler.

“What do you know about Larence Frawley?” he asked, making his presence known.

It took only a millisecond for the man’s face to change. An understanding crossed over his face then hidden away with a fatherly smile. “Looks like you’re making friends my boy.”

“We don’t have time to chat, Dr. Whitly” Malcolm sighed.

Deliberately he stood closer to Malcolm, earning a twitch in Dr. Whitly’s face.

“It’s not every day that I meet a friend of yours.”

“Excuse us for being rude but we are in a bit of a time crunch. I need to know where Frawley would be hiding out.”

Dr. Whitly chuckled “And you think we are co-conspirators or that I’m gifted with knowing all the famous killers out there,” he asked with a knowing look.

Ah, But you know me. Good. “I’ve heard much about you from your son.”

Dr. Whitly couldn’t help looking at Malcolm, his soft spot amongst the armor. He knew how to play this game and if needed he would use any means to win. Will was out there. He

wanted him back.

“And what he’s told me about you doesn’t match the image I was concocting.”

“I assure you that I am as skilled in culinary as he has told you” he drawled.

Watching his father size up Hannibal was ridiculous. Did he think he was a threat because of what he had mentioned before? Did he expect to fight Hannibal of all people over Will? That wasn’t going to happen; not even if a small part of him wanted to do so. He felt so seen by Will in a way that no one had ever seen him before. That’s probably why Hannibal was so desperate to get him back. Despite presenting emotionally flat, Will was the one thing that showed his true feelings. He regretted getting these two caught up in this mess.

“Please dad this is important,” he said, feeling the strange nervousness he felt whenever he called him that. This man was a killer, The Surgeon, and yet he was still his father.

“You really know how to pick them,” his father shook his head. “Alright I,” he took a step back, visibly reigning in the need to attack Hannibal.

“I have heard rumors about him spending time at the orchards in Jersey. Green apples were his favorite if I’m not mistaken. A bit of a ritualistic individual. After all, who here doesn’t hold an item or action to bring about good luck.”

“Well his luck is about to run out,” Hannibal said, setting off a chill down his spine.

“There is one thing you should know before you head off,” his father said, looking directly at Hannibal.

Not backing down or even remotely looking bothered Hannibal crossed the line on the floor just enough so that his father could whisper something. Without missing a beat Hannibal whispered something and confidently left the room.

“Malcolm,” his father growled, daggered eyes on the retreating figure. “Watch out for that man.”

“Frawley or Hannibal?”

A nervous smile graced his father’s face. “Right now,” He shook his head. “I’m not sure which is worse.”

Scrunching up his fist he thought about Dr. Whitly's warning; *“If you harm him there will be nothing left of you.”* It was a threat dripping with malice but the threat itself wasn’t what set him off, it was the fact that he would’ve threatened the exact same thing to Frawley if he could. In the same way Malcolm was Dr. Whitly’s soft spot Will was his; his heart.

It’s time to get that back.

Will's chest ached. There was no need for binds against his hands or ankles as the cramped wooden crate he'd been shoved in gave him hardly room to breathe as his knees were jammed against his chest. Small traces of light moved by above him in a repetitive motion and he could make out the sound of an engine. Taking a shallow breath he tried to reign in his fear response. He had been in far worse situations than this.

Hannibal will come for me. This wasn't false hope, it was a promise, one that was all but carved into him the moment they met. The second they had begun to change one another it was no longer fate that led them back to each other it was a purposeful search. He could be shipped off to the end of the world and somehow Hannibal would find him.

Below him he felt the smooth drive turn bumpy. He didn't know how long he had been knocked out but now he listened intently to the sound of the unpaved dirt road, the swooshing of tall grass dancing as they sped off.

Well there's not that many places in the heart of New York that would have tall grass like this, he thought just as the car gave a quick jerk. Face meeting the crate's wall he held in his wince. Sooner or later he would have to be let out of this and he was not going to be a docile victim.

With a screech, the car stopped.

Wait he told himself.

Heavy boots crunched against the ground as his captor made his way around to the back of what he knew as a truck now that the distinctive *thunk* of the bed's door dropped. With a grunt his confinement scrapped along the truck's bed. In a brief moment of weightlessness, he felt himself tumble forward. Pain shot up his arm as the unforgiving ground connected.

Stay alert. Don't blackout.

If he were made of glass he'd certainly be nothing more than shards by the time he had been laid flatly once more. Through the minuscule breathing holes he couldn't make out much. He had to be in a garage or a tool shed based on the dim lighting and the smell of oil. Soon he'd be let out. This man wouldn't let him rot in this place, that wasn't how he operated.

What is he waiting for? he thought as he heard the heavy boots pace nearby. *I had ruined his plan,* he realized looking back at the pattern of victims. Kidnapping wasn't his M.O. So why was he brought here? Had he felt backed into a corner?

His train of thought was quickly interrupted as the lid creaked open. Light flooded into his once dark surroundings temporarily blinding him. His stiff limbs couldn't kick or punch his captor as he blinked in the vision of being hauled to his feet. There was no reason he should be feeling anything other than fear in this moment but he felt alive, heart throbbing with adrenaline. If only he could get this tingling sensation of his dead limbs to go away. If that just stopped he could get Frawley.

In quick succession, a rope was hooked around his neck and hoisted up so that he had to balance on tiptoes to touch the ground. His left arm caught between the rope and his neck helped ease the pressure against his throat.

“Who are you?” Frawley asked the sledgehammer dragging on the ground.

He didn’t struggle. Doing so would be useless, he had to think. Had to stay alive until he could escape. He wasn’t some helpless thing.

“You.” Frawley pointed the sledgehammer at him. “I saw you that night.”

There was no need to clarify which night he referred to. A smile spread across his face as he recalled the exhilaration of taking out his victim's heart. He could do the same with Frawley. No, he would do far worse. He eyed the small bobble of Frawley's Adam's apple. If only he could get his hands there.

“I needed to understand why the heart. What do you use to weigh them?”

Frawley frowned. “You don’t understand. You wouldn't ask if you did.”

He pressed against the rope slowly. The other end inched in Frawley’s hand. If he maneuvered just right...

“I saw you. You know!” Frawley stepped closer.

Good, he thought feeling a bit more slack.

“What did you do to the heart? They have to be properly measured.” Another step forward.

“Come closer and I'll tell you.”

Complying Frawley stood right before him. “I gladly ate it,” he whispered.

Jumping he kicked off Frawley’s chest sending the rope running from his hand letting him meet the ground once more. It took a moment to breathe as his back took the brunt of his fall. In gasping spurts of air he removed the rope. He mustn’t have kicked hard enough. Frawley managed to grab him by the collar. Ducking he threw Frawley over his shoulder. The pain in his chest and ringing in his ear made it difficult to decipher the next punch. Rolling out of Frawley’s grip he picked up the sledgehammer. Crushing the door lock he sprinted.

The trees howled as he ran through them. Roots threatened to bring him down once more. Faster he ran. He couldn’t stop for a moment, not even to take in where he was.

Just a bit more he commanded his tiring legs.

For dear life Malcolm braced himself against the passenger window. Hannibal knew the speed he was going would be neck-breaking if they abruptly stopped. They couldn’t stop. Not another second could be wasted.

“Next left” Malcolm navigated, his voice shaking.

Veering left he pressed harder against the gas. Nothing on Earth or beyond could stop him.

“Frawley won't kill him right away.”

“Is that your attempt at being comforting?”

The car swerved into the next lane.

“Will is sturdy but there's only so much torture the body can take.”

Hard he blared his horn at the truck in front of him.

“We should've called back up” Malcolm squeaked.

Tearing his eyes from the ride for a brief second he glared at him. “You think they would offer you help? These were the people who doubted you and removed you from the case.” They didn't need the interruption.

“What are we going to do then?”

“I'm prepared to do anything necessary. Are you?”

He didn't know what to say. Did he hate the thought of Will being held captive? Yes. Did he want to make Frawley pay? Yes. But the insinuation of Hannibal's words made him hesitate. To what lengths would he have to go? Already he'd crossed so many lines since meeting Will. How much more would be required of him?

No, that wasn't fair. Will had never asked him to do any of those things. It had been his choice. He'd wanted to be close to Will, wanted a piece of the life he'd seen between Hannibal and Will. Hannibal appeared to set out to go to war for Will. Wasn't that how he should feel as well?

Metallic taste bloomed in Will's mouth as something connected with his ribs. It felt as though he'd been running in circles.

A little more he told himself taking half a second to gain his breath.

The warning for his seat belt chimed as he tossed it aside and jumped out the car door the moment he made it to the orchard. Sniffing the air he caught a whiff of blood and Will. Not caring for the car or Malcolm he ran into the row of trees.

Frantically he turned off the car and pocketed the keys before blitzing after Hannibal. Over his shoulder he glanced at the shed's smashed door. He longed to have a firearm. Going into this without a firearm or backup was nothing short of suicide. It was too late to go back.

Pass the point of no return.

Up ahead he could see Hannibal's back. Nothing seemed to slow him down. Not even the roots or fallen fruit tripped up his inhuman speed. Malcolm pushed himself to go faster. Throwing off his outer layers in some hope that it would help lighten the weight in his heart.

If anything they would be bread crumbs to find us, he thought.

Faster. Faster he ran until someone snatched him. With an abrupt jerk, he fell against the muscled chest of Hannibal. Questions froze as Hannibal's grip tightened and a blade moved into his view.

Frawley stood opposite of them in a similar position with Will.

The edge of the blade crept ever closer to him but it was the sureness behind Hannibal's movements that frightened him the most. He'd had people turn on him before but not in this way. And all the little inklings he had over the time spent around Hannibal now looked like blaring red flags. He hated himself for falling for tailored personas just like he had with his own father.

He'd faced off many in this line of work but being held under Hannibal's firm grasp he felt more like a scared boy than an ex-FBI agent or an NYPD profiler. Across the way he stared at Will, his face shrouded in blood.

"How nostalgic isn't it?" Will said, attempting a smirk that fell away with a wince.

That night on the cliffs had very much been like this though this time they didn't have the safety of the water to make an escape. They were trapped with little more than their own cunning to break free. He'd managed it, like always they would be ripped apart only to come back together.

"Sweet Will" he whispered as he held back the now trembling Malcolm.

He'd always looked so beautiful like this, the restriction of appearing 'normal' stripped away. Pure survival instinct shone in those eyes; bloodthirst steadily rising like a perfect souffle.

"Hannibal" Malcolm gasped as the blade nicked ever so slightly against his delicate neck.

"I didn't want it to come to this. Heaven knows that father of yours would not be pleased by this turn of events."

The fact of their promise loomed over him only as a needless hassle. Malcolm meant little to him, all he needed was Will. And if disposing him ensured that Will was once again in his arms then he could sleep peacefully at night.

“You won't do it,” Frawley screamed.

He smirked, pushing Malcolm along as he took a step closer.

“It's your job to judge people's hearts is it not?” he asked calmly.

Frawley trembled, clearly seeing the monster behind his person suit.

“I guarantee compared to me there's no one more worthy of your judgment.”

“You're just trying to save him.”

“I am granting you a chance to judge someone greater than that man” he pointed out while taking another step. “Unless you don't mind if I dispose of this one myself and then you.”

Whatever Hannibal was thinking it didn't matter. Will knew how this road would end.

His head pulsed as he kept his eyes trained on Hannibal.

One part of him questioned why his life constantly was punctured by moments like this while another more masochistic side felt energized by the familiar thrumming of his heart. Sanity had never been a stable part of his life.

Their voices came and went, still he watched Hannibal's mouth in an attempt to make out the words. Malcolm didn't deserve to be in this situation. He'd pushed this into reality the moment he allowed him in. What would become of him now was up to debate. There was hardly time to think on that as his already heavy body was tugged closer to the ground.

Frawley was trembling. That was a good sign. He tried to see Will's face. Will was barely holding onto consciousness. Whatever Frawley did to him he would receive twice the pain.

The way Bright remained rigid in his grasp was disappointing. Not that it mattered. He just needed to make the exchange. Once Will was free there would be nothing to stop them.

“Well?” he asked nonchalantly, taking another step forward. “You value your work as a tool of justice. I have taken far more innocents. This is a very easy trade.”

“But, but...” Frawley looked at Will.

“He is nothing. While you have your pick of me or this one. You must know the son of The Surgeon.”

Why was he just letting himself be moved around like a rag doll? His mind couldn't piece together what was happening. He felt so stupid, so weak, so helpless. He glanced at Will who even crumbled on the ground seemed stronger than he felt.

This is what happens when you go off on your own he chastised himself. Dani or even JT should've come as backup. They needed backup. They wouldn't help him. They hated him.

He couldn't go like this. Not like this. He wanted to rip Hannibal's throat for making him feel so pathetic.

Hannibal's grip on his wrist tightened then released slightly gaining his attention. No words were exchanged yet the tapping against his wrist signaled a countdown. To what he didn't know as they took another step forward. Frawley seemed so captivated by their slow movements that he didn't realize they were so close. If needed Frawley could reach out and grab him.

The realization clicked in his head a millisecond before he was tossed forward. Momentum pulling him closer he felt something cool run down his elbow and then a bright burst of pain as he tumbled. Grunting he lifted himself from the ground. Frawley's blade had wedged itself into his bicep. The minuscule attempt to pull it out stopped the second he touched the hilt igniting the warning bells in his head. Through teary eyes he saw Will struggle with the rope holding his arms behind his back. Letting his injured arm lay limp he hurried over as fast as his shaky feet could carry him.

"This has gotten out of control" Will chuckled over the screams coming from Hannibal tussling with Frawley.

"Not the best afterparty I've been to." Malcolm looked like a complete wreck and although he would like to take him far away from this place he needed to stay and fight besides Hannibal.

Scrunching his face Malcolm reached for the rope cutting into his wrist. He held back his own wincing as he focused on the jutting blade. The tedious task was costing them time. Frawley had to be stopped, Malcolm had to get to the hospital, he and Hannibal had to run. For now, he had to get free.

"I can't" Malcolm panted, his sweaty fingers unable to grasp the knot.

He eyed the blade.

Malcolm's face paled even more. "You'd have to do it" he choked out.

Before another thought or word could form Malcolm disappeared from sight and he felt the hilt in his hands. There was no time for soothing words that wouldn't heal the pain. All he could do was make it fast.

A scream didn't rip through him as the blade tore from him. There had only been a bright burst of light behind his clenched eyes and then nothing. It had been black and silent until he finally felt himself come back around. His head could barely register the way his heartbeat seemed to come from his wounded arm or the taste of iron that coated his mouth. His body refused to move anymore. Frozen in a position that allowed him the front row seat to the madness. Whatever reserves Will had were gone. Just like Hannibal, he moved about Frawley tearing into him like a wild animal. But their movements were not uncoordinated. Even from here he could see the openings Hannibal gave to Will and the way they paired Frawley's attempts.

Like a dance, he thought. A dance they had done before. A dance that showed their true selves.

Exhilaration flowed through him as his blade found home in Frawley's chest before returning to his side. This was a taunt, he knew the moment he began to follow Hannibal's lead that this had to be done slowly. He couldn't help smiling. In this gruesome scene he felt whole besides Hannibal.

Frawley toppled to the ground. He landed one more shallow stab before Hannibal's hand held his. He was smiling too. Will's heart rang so loud in his ears but in moments like this there was no need for words; they were connected, mixed together like the blood all over them.

With strange tenderness Hannibal cradled his face, eyes searching perhaps for where his wounds began. As if they were already safely back home Hannibal pushed back his bangs and placed a kiss onto his forehead. He latched onto the light pressure, wanting more but this wasn't their home. Right now he wasn't so sure if there was a home left for them after this. He wanted to make a joke about running off to Cuba now.

Seeming to earn a second wind, Frawley rose like a zombie behind Will and Hannibal. Whatever world they were in seemed unbothered. Something inside of him pulled him to his feet and rushed forward. Injured arm regained feeling in the split moment he snatched the fallen blade. With all his might he slashed through Frawley's neck.

Warm.

The blood showering him felt unbelievably warm. So warm it almost helped ease the coldness seeping into him.

Again and again, he brought his blade down. He had to make sure Frawley wouldn't get up.

Frawley wouldn't be a problem any longer. Now he laid below Malcolm, throat appearing like bloody shredded cheese. There were many things Hannibal wanted to say; words marking the beauty that was Will covered in blood, the frustration of Will's damsel in distress act, the pride directed at Malcolm's assistance, and the loops that they would inevitably jump through to come from this event. Words could be left aside for now. They would make their escape just as they had before. They would rebuild whatever was lost.

Will smiled at Malcolm. He was as lucid as possible with the amount of blood he'd lost. Careful of his injury he pulled Malcolm into a hug. Cradling him he plunged his bloody hands into Malcolm's hair. A deep sigh rose from him. His eyes wanted to burst out into tears and never let go. Malcolm wouldn't forget tonight. Neither of them could.

"You saved us" he whispered.

Hannibal's hand moved to rest over Malcolm's back as well. The touch stopped the slight tremors vibrating through them.

"You did well" Hannibal complimented.

Against his neck he felt Malcolm smile.

Epilogue

Cold had settled into his body, freezing every ounce of him instantly. At that moment he wasn't sure if he would ever feel anything besides the cold, but then warmth came. Hands laid over him shielding him from everything that threatened to tear into him. And he'd fallen into a peaceful sleep.

Lights flashed behind his eyelids but all he could see was Hannibal and Will's bloody dance. Sirens acted as music to their motions and then all at once his eyes opened.

The starch white of the room stung his senses. The after shadows of Hannibal and Will vanished as his vision settled. His mother had wept when she saw him all bandaged up.

"It's nothing" he repeated every time she mentioned him changing careers.

Gil had paid a short visit soon after but remained tight-lipped on what led him to wake up in the hospital.

An emptiness began to worm its way in as the days passed with no news of where Hannibal or Will were. A part of him wasn't sure if they existed at all.

"Are you sure you want to be put on this case?" Gil asked, holding the new case file as if it were an explosive.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

He knew the answer to the question; everyone did. It had only been a week since his departure from the hospital. By pure luck, he had retained movement and feeling in his arm. A few intense sessions of physical therapy and it would be almost as if it didn't happen at all.

But to everyone else it was a looming nightmarish situation. They wanted to tell him that he needed to seek help. They wanted him to play the perfect victim to be shaken up and babied or to be impervious. He was neither.

He could almost laugh at how his near-death experience had reverted things back to normal at the station. Whatever reservations JT and Dani had about him being The Surgeon's son was kept quiet for now.

Still, he didn't know what had become of Frawley's body. No one wanted to talk about that case. It was for the best to leave it be.

"You sure?" Gil eyed his hand but it remained stationary.

“You know I’m going to solve it anyway.”

“I prefer it if you don’t go rogue on us this time.”

“No promises” he chuckled.

“Going somewhere?” Ainsely asked as he carefully took apart his weapon display.

“Moving actually. Felt like it was the right time for a change of scenery.”

“Moving just from here or from New York altogether?”

“New York couldn’t get rid of me that easily. Neither can you.”

The air between them held a hint of awkwardness. He wouldn’t tell her that he knew she had reported on his disappearance or that it had been thanks to her tracking his phone that the police were able to find him. He should’ve thanked her but it felt as though the time for that had come and gone.

“As if mother would let you leave the city after-”

“After the Gala. You can say it. I’m not going to have flashbacks or anything.”

“Aren’t you?”

“I’m not,” he said confidently. “Believe it or not I’m sleeping far more comfortably now.”

“Only you can come out better after something like that.”

“I’m not so sure that better is the right word.”

Ainsley frowned. “You really are okay though? I mean at least your version of it.”

“Yes. But please tell mother that I’m not coming to dinner tonight.”

“You can’t do that to me,” she complained. “You know how she gets when you’re not there. And you really shouldn’t be eating take-out every night.”

“I have other plans.”

“If it’s another case you have to keep me in the loop.”

“It’s not. I just have to get this packing done.”

“You sure you’re alright?”

Smiling, he pulled her into a hug.

“Since when do we hug?” she chuckled.

“You’re right.” Quickly he let go. “Thank you for the flowers.” He motioned to the small arrangement of Amaryllis. It was funny that she would bring flowers that symbolize pride. Was she proud that he’d survived?

“I didn’t bring those. And I know for a fact that mother would’ve sent something three times that size.”

“It must be a mistaken delivery,” he shrugged.

A few minutes after Ainsley left he took the arrangement. Three flowers fused by one stem dipped in the brightest of red stared at him. Abandoning his packing he shielded the flower along his journey.

It was difficult to understand all that he felt as he reached for the door of the plant’s true home. With an easy twist, the door opened and he walked through.

“You’re just in time” Will greeted as he set the table.

“We knew you’d accept our invitation” Hannibal smirked.

Smiling, he laid the Amaryllis in the center of the table.

End Notes

Dam, it's been a long time since I've posted anything. Thank you for reading this story. It was an idea I had in storage for a while and figured it was time to just go for it. This story is completed and a new chapter will be posted every day until its conclusion.
Happy Holidays to all.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!